

A simple but unanswered question of why Thai students lack practical English communicative skills

คำถามธรรมชาติที่ยังคงไร้คำตอบว่าทำไมเด็กไทยยังขาดทักษะการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ

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Abstract

The focus of this article is on a simple question raised to ask about the current situation of English communicative skills among Thai students with an aim to see an increasing number of Thai citizens communicating in English efficiently, particularly in the marketplace environment. Even though the question examined in this paper is not a new issue in Thai society as it has been elevated among the public for several decades, it is worth investigating when time has flown to the third decade of the 21st century to see the progress of the English communication phenomenon in Thailand with a hope that the findings, in a certain degree, would be useful for English teaching and learning in a Thai context. Several current news reports, surveys and research were explored to examine recent English usage circumstances. Although the results of the discovery were relatively unsatisfactory compared with hard efforts that have been tremendously dedicated to this problematic issue, the investigation presented in this paper together with useful perspectives and the disclosed roots of the problems could be the voice of a Thai English teacher who was trying to offer some viewpoints and factual information to the authority to look back onto the country's unsolved matter seriously.

Keywords: English in a Thai context; English language education; English teaching; English learning; verbal ability

บทคัดย่อ

จุดประสงค์ของบทความนี้คือการตั้งคำถามธรรมดากำถามหนึ่งถึงสถานการณ์ทักษะการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษของเด็กไทยในยุคปัจจุบัน ด้วยความมุ่งหวังที่จะเห็นจำนวนคนไทยสามารถสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพเพิ่มมากขึ้น โดยเฉพาะในตลาดแรงงาน ถึงแม้ว่าคำถามในบทความนี้จะไม่ใช่เรื่องใหม่ในสังคมไทย ด้วยเหตุว่า คำถามดังกล่าวได้มีการพูดถึงมาอย่างต่อเนื่องในช่วงหลายทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา อย่างไรก็ตาม เมื่อระยะเวลาได้ผ่านมาถึงทศวรรษที่ 3 ของศตวรรษที่ 21 ประเด็นนี้ควรถูกหยิบยกขึ้นมาตามอีกรั้งหนึ่ง เพื่อติดตามพัฒนาการของการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย รายงานท่าทางการศึกษา และงานวิจัยหลายชิ้น ได้จัดทำขึ้นเพื่อศึกษาสถานการณ์การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทยในปัจจุบันด้วยความหวังว่า ข้อเท็จจริงที่พบรจะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในบริบทของประเทศไทยไม่มากก็น้อย ถึงแม้ว่าผลของการศึกษาและวิจัยอาจจะยังไม่เป็นที่พึงพอใจเมื่อเปรียบเทียบกับความพยายามอย่างหนักของหน่วยงานที่เกี่ยวข้องเพื่อแก้ไขปัญหานี้ อย่างไรก็ตาม การนำเสนอข้อมูลในบทความนี้ รวมถึงมุมมองที่เป็นประโยชน์ พร้อมที่มาของรากເຈົ້າแห่งปัญหา อาจจะเป็นสิ่งที่นักศึกษาอังกฤษที่กำลังพยายามนำเสนอความคิดเห็น และข้อเท็จจริงไปยังผู้อำนวยการตัดสินใจ ให้หันกลับมามองปัญหาของประเทศไทย ที่ยังไม่ได้รับการแก้ไขอย่างจริงจัง

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาอังกฤษในบริบทประเทศไทย การสอนภาษาอังกฤษ การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

ความสามารถทางภาษา

Introduction

With regard to today's globalization of our world, many countries across the globe, particularly their education related institutions, seem to be well-aware of English as a means of communication. Thailand is no exception. English has been placed as the key international language employed to communicate with the outside world for various purposes such as economic, political, academic and cultural contact (Baker, 2012; Rappa & Wee, 2006). Thailand has emphasized the importance and role of English in recent years as part of its national education policy executed by the Commission of Higher Education since the reform in 1999. However, the result of the English learning performance of people in the country has been an insistent dissatisfaction up until the present day.

What has happened to the educational system in Thailand, particularly English teaching and learning pedagogy? This question is not a new question at all and has been echoed for years, and still, it has been an unanswered question until today. As an English teacher for both non-English and English major students for nearly seven years, I have been in doubt and frustrated sometimes when I encounter a phenomenon of students who are

unable to produce their English as they are supposed to, based on their length of pre-university English study of around 13-15 years.

The aforementioned phenomenon excludes the minority of proficient English learners studying in a limited number of Thailand's leading universities and international educational institutions where student ability screening is adopted and English is a medium of teaching and learning. My focus is more on the context outside of those elite universities. The focus group in this article includes Thai students in general who are the majority of the student populations in Thailand. Evidently, the issue of English teaching and learning situation in Thailand has been widely and continually discussed among the high-ranked members in the Education Ministry, including its ministers and renowned scholars in the field. However, the final performance of the learners is still as unsatisfactory as it used to be some time ago or has even become worse; the fact is that there are a large number of new graduates with inadequate English proficiency required by the marketplace.

Consequently, in this article the current situation of English teaching and learning situation in Thailand was investigated to discover the phenomena that have contributed to today's English circumstance in Thailand. Added to that, the English proficiency of Thai students was examined. Finally, the dilemma of English teaching and learning in Thailand was explored together with the tendency of its future direction.

Current situation of English in Thailand

There has been an effort to make English widely communicated in Thailand by the relevant institutions, ranging from the initiatives of Education Ministers of several governments to educational related organizations. However, the English proficiency rate of Thai people is still measurably unchanged. Based on the recent survey conducted by the Switzerland-based Education First, a language school operator with branches worldwide, English proficiency of Thai people is ranked 74th out of 100 countries and is positioned at 17th from 25 countries in Asia with a considerably “very low proficiency” performance (Education First, 2019). With the latest ranking, it indicated that the English proficiency of Thai people was behind Vietnam and Indonesia which were tiered 52nd and 61st, respectively (Education First, 2019). Additionally, the English speaking population in Thailand was only 10% and positioned 5th in the 10 ASEAN countries after Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Singapore (English of Thai People in ASEAN, 2014). Although there was a negative argument regarding the test scores as the measure of English proficiency which is mainly based on a narrow monolingual native speaker model of English (Baker 2012; Jenkins & Leung 2014; McNamara 2014), the results of

these test scores hinted at significant impact on public viewpoints of English language proficiency in the kingdom of Thailand (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017).

Tracing back to explore an attempt of the Ministry of Education and other relevant educational agencies that are the main operational organizations' driving force to leverage the nation's English proficiency, it is noticeable that English teaching and learning has been given prominence in all learning stages and areas. The Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) under the Ministry of Education is the primary institution that supervises and monitors the country's basic education for all Thai children. Its English emphasis could be seen from its policy to promote English to Thai students nationwide starting from the primary school level. This does not include the individual policy of each school to embrace English in the kindergarten level which is a common scene in Thailand.

Based on the philosophy of the OBEC towards English, it perceives that English is a compulsory language to be taught and learned in the Thai territory. English is regarded as a crucial tool for people to seek various kinds of knowledge in the world today as notable knowledge is recorded in English. Added to that, according to the OBEC's viewpoints, it believed that English could be used as a communication tool to get Thai learners to update themselves with the world's current issues and information as well as to use English in various competitions in the world stages (Office of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, 2014).

The OBEC, therefore, has launched the teaching and learning policy to the schools under the basic education nationwide with an ultimate goal to level up English proficiency in all Thai learners. The remarkable policies that highlight the essence of English learning are the following. First, adopting the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as the English teaching and learning operational framework, including curriculum design, teaching and learning development, testing, assessment, teacher development, and setting and designing learning goals. Second, the OBEC has encouraged all English teachers to adjust their teaching strategies by focusing on the communication skills of learners (Communicative Language Teaching: CLT) instead of being grammar-oriented and learning from memorization as before with an aim to improve the learners' communication skills. (Office of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, 2014).

In addition, in 2016 the Ministry of Education introduced a policy with an anticipated achievement goal for the nation's higher education. The goal of the government's prerequisite is to develop university students' English competence to be equipped with academic and career competences with English communication skills in the level of "working knowledge" (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2016). This government direction signaled that

new graduates are expected to be capable of efficiently communicating in English at their working environment.

These are some concrete pieces of evidence illustrating that Thai educational institutions have been significantly contributing their hard efforts to accelerate English competence for people in the nation. However, when it comes to the overall English proficiency assessment, the result has been a drawback scenario year by year. Still, what are the factors affecting the English situation in Thailand to make it worse? There is no consensus answer to that question; however, many perspectives have been raised and posited to our society for discussion by numerous celebrated scholars, experts in the field and English teachers across the country with some perspectives presented below.

The dilemma of English teaching and learning in Thailand

There might be some questions raised about where English education in Thailand should go or when we should achieve our targeted goals. Although these two questions have not been answered yet, the related institutions have been continually attempting to explore some practical ways out for Thai education to seriously improve English competence for the nation's citizens.

The former Education Minister, Teerakiat Jareonsettasin (2016-2019) asserted, on an occasion of the national English teachers training in 2018, that Thai students' English development is essential and immediately requires a serious improvement. (Mala, 2018). The former minister perceived that there were three main challenges that need to be addressed in English teaching and learning situation in the country. The first perspective requiring special attention is that the skills of the Thai English teachers, curriculum and teaching strategies urgently need to be investigated, while the poor attitude of the learners towards English is another crucial factor requiring the same level of scrutiny.

With regard to the problematic issue concerning the local Thai English teachers and their teaching approaches, this disturbing matter is not a new topic discussed in the Thai society. Tuaycharoen (2006) studied variables that could deter students from their English learning potential. She pointed out that language teachers' capacity in English and method of teaching are crucial factors responsible for the unproductive status of English teaching and learning in Thailand. Added to that, Noom-ura (2013) suggested in her research article on "English-Teaching Problems in Thailand and Thai Teachers' Professional Development Needs" that English language teaching and learning and the professional development (PD) is urgently required by the concerned parties due to the failure of English education in Thailand. One of

the clear phenomena is that Thai students have spent twelve years studying English in primary and secondary schools, but their English performance is still questionable. The original source of this problem, in my perspective, could potentially be from the Education Ministry's distorted policy and direction itself. Like obtaining and being equipped with knowledge and skills in other fields, learning a language - in this context, English – requires good quality archetypes or molds to create, shape or produce good quality products. In other words, Thailand needs to have qualified English teachers ready for the Thai children who are in their early learning stage.

However, in reality, the research conducted by British Council suggested a disgraceful result that 75% of English teachers in Thailand are ranked at the A2 elementary level in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (The Nation, 2018). How does this outrageous fact significantly affect the quality of the English learners? The CEFR's A2 level possessed by the majority of the Thai English teachers perceptibly signifies their limited English ability to be a qualified English teacher.

According to CEFR levels, the A2 is defined in the CEFR descriptors that the basic user “can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.” (Council of Europe, 2020).

From this viewpoint, we might now have some perspective on the initial source of the problem. Nevertheless, we cannot put the burden on the serving Thai English teachers alone; they endeavor throughout the nation to support Thai education with good intentions. This skewed phenomenon could be principally dismissed by the authority, the Ministry of Education. In my view, the responsible authorities should prioritize investigating the source of the problem by emphasizing some of the following aspects seriously.

The first aspect requiring immediate attention from the relevant organization is the teacher-students recruiting system. Undeniably, in the Thai context, some students who enter the teachers training universities located in every part of Thailand are candidates who are not eligible for other faculties that require a higher entrance score. Therefore, they need to pursue their study in a learning area which they are not passionate about, and that might impact the quality of their learning result while they are students. Consequently, that could affect their

teaching performance as an English teacher after graduation (Sakworawich, 2015; Thumthong, 2003).

Secondly, appealing benefits and welfare that could allure the new generations to turn their attention to jump into teacher training programs and become a qualified teacher after their graduation should be offered. Statistically, the basic monthly salary of a teacher starts at 15,050 Thai Baht for the newly graduated teacher (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 2015). Compared with salaries of other careers for new graduates, the benefit for a teacher is considered relatively low. In the present marketplace, the salaries for new jobbers range from 18,000 to 25,000 Thai Baht, depending on the knowledge and skills of the workers. The highest salary offered to a graduate is 40,000 Baht for a programmer or software developer while a sales engineer, project coordinator, personal assistant and Japanese interpreter could gain 35,000 Baht monthly (Adecco, 2020).

Alongside these two main considerations, teacher training as well as well continual assessment and evaluation for the adopted strategies should be done on a regular basis. With different measures applied to cross check and promote the effectiveness and readiness of the English teacher-students, the final result could be anticipated and foreseen that qualified English teachers will emerge in the market to shape the desired labor force demanded by the market.

The second problematic aspect affecting the English proficiency of local people is the existing English curriculum and teaching strategies. There has been a long history in teaching English in Thailand with a focus on language accuracy and memorization instead of natural communication of English. Phongsirikul (2017) traces back to the teaching and learning of English in the Kingdom of Thailand by narrating one of the key obstacles that hypothetically interrupts the learning of English among Thais - the focus of English teaching and learning on grammar and other native speaker norms. She claims that this teaching strategy tended to degrade or discourage students' confidence and passion to learn English which is the only compulsory foreign language at both schools and in higher education.

From my direct experience when asked to teach English, sometimes my teaching was framed by the given teaching policy and materials which are mostly all about grammar and with other circumstances of the native speaker norms or standard English. There is no surprise that the outcome tends to turn out the same as it used to be a couple of decades ago. This is supported by a notable comment from the former Minister of Education that each Thai student studies English for at least 12 years in the schooling system, but most of them remain unable to communicate in English efficiently in a real life setting (Mala, 2018). In responding

to this matter, the educational authority should concede that there has been something systematically wrong in Thailand's English education that requires immediate attention and rectification. Consequently, it can prioritize the problematic issues and resolve each drawback proximately and effectively.

The final drawback that theoretically obstructs English learning performance is the learners' attitude towards English. There are many factors that affect students' attitude and motivation to achieve English learning goals (Seifert, 2004; Weiner, 1985). The first factor comprises outside variables such as learning environment, including teachers, teaching and learning strategies, materials and so forth that were mentioned earlier. The second aspect is an inner factor - positive attitude in English learning. This attitude plays a critical role in promoting students' satisfactory learning outcome.

With regard to attitude and motivation perspectives (e.g., Astaman, 2009; Gardner, 2006; Weiner, 1985), these are claimed to be noteworthy factors that play an important role in promoting people's learning and fostering them to achieve the set goals. Therefore, if Thai students have a positive attitude towards learning English, they could enjoy and produce satisfactory performance in English communication. Added by the research in the area of learning a second language (e.g., Gardner, 1985; Oxford, 1999; Rod, 1997; Zhu, 2014), they unanimously confirm that positive attitude towards a particular aspect can motivate the learner to foster a pleasing outcome. Consequently, in learning English, teaching and learning environments notionally contribute to the learners' English learning achievement.

Considered to be one of the significant strategies to create a positive environment in English learning classroom, teachers can unquestionably play a crucial role. According to the research conducted by Thepsiri and Pojanapunya (2012), low proficiency students claimed that one of the significant factors contributing to their success or failure in learning English is the teacher. Accordingly, the teachers can adopt or adapt well designed strategies from their effective training courses and employ them in their classroom teaching and activities to inspire students to keep up with their learning while maximizing the learners with English competence gained from each learning class.

To recap the point of the attitude attribute in promoting English learning performance, the national project of English teacher training conducted by British Council in collaboration with the Education Ministry suggested that teachers that were trained in communicative teaching techniques have more confidence in teaching English in the communicative approach and more confidence in using English in their classrooms (British Council helps train Thai English-language teachers, 2018). It was further reported that the change of teaching strategies

significantly shifted the atmosphere of the classroom and the students' attitude towards English learning to be more positive. Students were enthusiastic to attend the class and made every effort to take part in class activities. That phenomenon could result in improving the English ability of Thai students considerably.

Conclusion

The factors that contribute to the drawbacks for poor English communication in Thailand for several decades were explored with concrete supporting evidence. The problems could range from the initial stage of education when all the learners are young, the teachers, teachers' training, teaching and learning strategies to the attitude of the students. The roots of the problem were identified and analyzed point by point in order to see each obstacle clearly. As I mentioned earlier, the discussed points in this article are not a new discovery of the phenomenon; the aforementioned thought-provoking issues have been there awaiting the authority and relevant agencies to address them with necessary, constant and serious actions dedicated from all concerned working units to overcome these challenges together. Every concerned operational institution should put a well-designed educational policy and plan into effective implementation nationwide. Consequently, the questions of clear direction of English education in Thailand and when to achieve the set goal could possibly be answered soon with a brighter future to foresee an increasing level of English competence in Thailand's next generations.

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