Teaching English in Thailand: An Uphill Battle

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The main purpose of this article is to give an overview of English language teaching in Thailand. Firstly, some problems involved in the teaching of English to Thais are discussed, and this is followed by an examination of some of the approaches used here for the teaching of English. Finally, attempts to tackle problems are presented.

Problems

In the first regard, it will be shown that English and Thai are different at all levels: pronunciation, word, grammar and text. Moreover, there are different cultural notions between the two.

Pronunciation

In most cases, pronunciation problems result from the loss of muscular plasticity in the mouth of an adult foreign language learner (Brown, 1987). In other words, it is hard for an adult language learner to pronounce certain sounds that are unfamiliar to them. Some problems are as follows:

1. English phonemes

1.1 Some sounds are difficult for Thai learners to produce. For example, Thai people are confused by the sounds /l/ and /r/ as in rice and lice. For example:

Please give me some fried lice (instead of fried rice.)

Other sounds are for example:

/tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in chop and shop.

I want to chop for something (instead of shop.)

1.2 The English final consonant may be the most difficult part of the word for Thais to pronounce. For example, Thai final stop sounds are all unvoiced. Therefore, it is hard for Thai students to produce a final voiced consonant such as bed, or bid. The influence of the voiced final consonant /d/ on the preceding vowel /e/ and /ɪ/ lengthens the sounds of the vowels. Thus, some Thai students tend to say bate
instead of *bed* and *beat* instead of *bid*. Moreover, in many cases, final consonant sounds such as */d/, */s/, */ʃ/ */dz/* are changed into an alveolar stop sound such as */t/* as in *English* becoming *Englit*.

The mispronunciation of English final consonants may make it difficult for English native speakers to understand Thai pronunciation. For example:

**Execute me** (instead of *excuse me*.)

1.3 This problem also induces grammatical errors in English. Thai learners usually delete the final suffix sound for example: He go (instead of *goes*) to work everyday.

1.4 Consonant clusters are hard. For example: *closed* becomes *kote*.

2. **Stress pattern**

2.1 Thais usually give a stress at the end of an English word. For example, they stress the final sound of the following: *education*, *economy*, *democracy*, *facility* and *librarian*

2.2 Thais do not shift the stress after the shift of the suffix to change the part of speech of a word.

For example: *economy* and *economic*, *library* and *librarian*. For Thais, there is no difference in the stress patterns of the pair. They pronounce *economy* and *economic*, *library* and *librarian* with the same stress pattern.

In short, some English sounds and stress patterns are difficult for Thai learners because adult learners tend to lose the “muscular plasticity” in the mouth.

**Words**

1. **Word formation**

The formation of words is different. In English, many morphemes constitute a word. For example: *boys*, *boyish*. In Thai, polysyllabic words are usually borrowed from Sanskrit, Pali or Cambodian because most Thai words are monosyllabic. Some new words are derived from compound nouns or compound verbs. For example: *โรงเรียน* a *place for study* เด็กชาย *child* ชาย a compound verb meaning *cover* and *hide*.

As such, it is difficult for Thai students to retain English morphemes when they use English.

2. **Collocation**

Some words cannot co-occur in English. However, some collocational restrictions are violated by Thai learners. For example:

*a My hair is busy (instead of My hair is messy.)*

*a I play computer (instead of I work on the computer.)*

*a I closed (opened) the radio (instead of I turned off (on) the radio.)*
In brief, the formation of words in the respective languages is different. In English, morphemes form a word, but in Thai, words are monosyllabic. Sometimes, compound words are formed. Therefore, Thai learners seldom retain English suffixes. English collocational restrictions are also violated.

**Grammar**

Probably grammar is the most difficult part for Thai students. The difficulty results from many factors: the typological differences between the two languages and the negative influence of the mother tongue.

Thai and English are from different linguistic families. Thai is in the Thai Kadai linguistic family, a language group spoken in Thailand, in the Shan State in Myanma, in a small part in Bangladesh and in the Southern part of China, in Yunnan. English is in the Germanic family, which is in the Indo-European family. Some major conceptual discrepancies between the two languages are as follows:

1. **Subject–verb agreement**

   For example: *He studies* English everyday.

   The verb *studies* agrees with the number of the subject, and it indicates the tense used. If Thai students are aware of the subject–verb agreement, it is likely that they can make progress in their lessons. In other words, they are not fossilized—a term used to describe those whose learning of English has come to a halt.

   The concept of subject–verb agreement is hard for Thai learners because we do not have an obvious boundary of a sentence. In Thai, we can go from one sentence to another. The subject can be deleted if assumed known between the addressee and addressee. The verb or adjective is the center of a sentence. All these Thai sentential characteristics impede Thai students from developing an accurate English sentential concept. Therefore, they produce errors as follows:

   * In Bangkok have a lot of traffic jam.
   * I like English; but I don’t like mathematics (The punctuation ; cannot be used.)
   * Pahurad (a place name in Bangkok) was crowded and bad temperature and it smelled bad.
   * In spite of studying English is difficult, I will try to study it.

2. **Topic–comment structure**

   In English, only one noun phrase is allowed to act as the subject, but many Thai students put the topic–comment structure, or two noun phrases, in the initial position of a sentence.
Money I give my mother.
The first reason, the transportation is convenient. Sometimes, the word about is used to introduce the topic.
About French, I like food.
About study, I study English and other subjects.

3. **Passive voice**

In English the passive voice is characterized by its syntactic structure, by the verb be and the past participle. For example:
The room is cleaned everyday.
The room was cleaned yesterday.
The room has been cleaned.

In Thai, the passive voice can be interpreted by its contextual clues. For example:
Pad Thai, put egg and lunch box. (It means put an egg in pad Thai, a Thai dish, then put the pad Thai in the lunch box.)

Therefore, Thai students produce fascinating errors concerning the passive voice. For example:
She was continuously taken the photos.
The restaurant located on Sukhumvit Road.

In brief, the English passive voice is syntactic but the Thai one is contextual. With such a discrepancy, some Thai students make a great number of errors concerning this structure. Therefore, it is a milestone for English teachers if the Thai students can use the English passive voice accurately. If they can, they are good enough to go further in their English lessons.

4. **Relative clause**

The relative clause is a difficult structure for Thai students. If they can master it, it means that they are ready for other complex sentences. In English. A common error in the relative clause is for example:
The man who live next door he is a doctor.

5. **Participial phrase**

This is difficult for even advanced students. The deleted subject is the same one as in the main clause.
Running along the street, he saw a car accident.

6. **Subordination**

Some errors produced by Thai students in this regard are as follows:
When my mother went out. She forgot to turn off the lights.
Because I want to go abroad.

In other words, the students produce fragments instead of grammatical sentences.

All these structures are difficult for Thai students. It takes time and patience for them to master the English grammar structures.
In sum, the typological differences between the two languages make it hard for Thai students to fully understand the English sentential concept.

Explanations to account for errors are as follows:

1. The linguistic discrepancies are enormous.
2. English is a complex language with a great number of rules which seem not to rules which seem not to make sense to many Thai student.

In the process of learning a foreign language, beginners are not familiar with all the rules. Metaphorically, for them, using English is similar to a right-handed who is forced to use the left-hand to do things. They are awkward, having a tendency to make a lot of errors.

Therefore, Thai students need a tremendous amount of time and practice to understand and master the English sentential concept.

Text

At the text level, the Thai rhetorical pattern is different from the English one. In the following example, the writing does not have a thesis statement. The writer begins with a rhetorical question and then answers it. The audience cannot see the point the author is making until the end of the text.

If someone asks, “Where is the Thai identity?” or “What is the Thai identity?” I think many people would have to think about it for a while before they could answer.

This is not because there is no Thai identity, but rather, because Thailand is a country in which there are a lot of what we call “identities.”

The words “never mind” may be considered one of the Thai identities. I don’t think there is any country in the world where people use the words “never mind” in every situation like Thai people do. “Have you eaten yet?” We answer, “Never mind.” “Do you have enough money?” . . . “Never mind.” “I have to go home now.” . . . “Never mind.” “You look pale. Are you okay” . . . “Never mind.” . . . “Sorry about your father’s death.” “Never mind.” . . . “Never mind.” “Here is the bathroom. Are you looking for the toilet?” . . . “Never mind.”

These are only some examples. Our Thai “never mind” does not mean “don’t mention it” as used by people in other countries, but it also has various other meanings. However, this is not the only identity we have; we also have other identities.
Thailand is not only one hundred or two hundred years old, but it has been a country for a long time. Besides, it is one of the countries which is independent and has a distinct identity which includes, for example, language, culture, art, habits, and even beliefs in holy things. One of these beliefs that we have had since ancient times concerns the construction of “spirit houses.” It is believed that each piece of land has a guardian spirit, who must be honored if the human occupants want to enjoy peace and prosperity. A spirit house is usually erected somewhere in the compound, often in the garden but sometimes on the roof in the case of large commercial properties like modern condominiums.

At present almost every Thai household has a spirit house or “Saan Phra Phum,” which is a small house–like shrine dedicated to the spirits of the home. The shrine practically faces north and lies outside the shadow of the main house. Simple “Saan Phra Phum” may be in the form of a very small Thai–style house, made of wood, while more elaborate ones may resemble small temples. In either case, these are kept supplied with regular offerings of fresh flowers, incense sticks, and sometimes food to insure the continued protection of the spirit. Such offerings are also made at major road intersections where car accidents have often occurred, in hotel gardens, and anywhere else the people perceive there is the dwelling of guardian spirit.

Both the words “never mind” and the belief in the “spirit house” I have mentioned above are just some different examples of Thai identities. Yet, as I have said before, these are not the only identities we have, we also have many others.


From the text, the rhetorical pattern is not acceptable by the academic English native speaking audience. In English, a thesis statement, which indicates the main idea of the text, is expected. Then in each paragraph, there should be a topic sentence, elaboration and an example. In the text, the author discusses the subject matter immediately without a thesis statement. Then at the end, the author’s purpose of writing is revealed.
Cultural notions

There are some different cultural notions between Thai and English. For example:

1. **Collectivism VS individualism**

A Thai student wanted to see her English native speaking advisor, so she asked one of her friends to keep her company. The advisor thought that the two students wanted to see her, but she was surprised to find that only one student did.

2. **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is not taken as seriously as it is in the West because in the Thai context, copying is the first step of learning. Students are expected to follow a predecessor’s footsteps. As a result, it is difficult, for example, to teach summary writing to Thais because students assume that original words can be copied without acknowledging the source. Since the author’s words are highly regarded, they should copy them as they are. Changing the original words may insult the author!

3. **Critical thinking**

Thais are not encouraged to criticize the teacher or what she/he says. Textbooks are regarded as holy materials. However, critical thinking is a major aspect to evaluate a student’s development, especially in writing.

For example, the essay on Thai Identities is a descriptive and an expository essay. However, it would be better if we changed it into an argumentative essay. The author should argue why the words “never mind” and “the spirit house” are considered Thai identities since both of them have some negative impacts on the Thai culture,

For example, a Thai driver hit a car driven by a Japanese man. The Thai got out of the car and then said, “Never mind,” meaning it was not a big problem for him; he could manage it. However, the Japanese driver was angry because he assumed that the Thai did not consider his car accident a serious matter.

In the case of the “spirit house,” the negative effect is that it shows that Thais are superstitious. In fact, a spirit house does not represent Buddhism because in Buddhism, the concept of deity is explained in abstract terms that animals and humans undergo change in a circle of life starting from birth, existence and death. The same is held true for other things such as the universe, the earth, and others.

However, the author does not justify the claim that the two should be considered Thai identities. He only describes and explains them.

As a whole, there are many teaching problems arising from the discrepancies of the two languages: sound, word, grammar, text and cultural notions.
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The second part of the article concerns English approaches adopted in Thailand.

**Approaches to Teaching English**

Major approaches to teaching English are:

1. Grammar-translation
2. Communicative approach
4. Order of acquisition (Ellis, 2001: 1-35)
5. Functional grammar

In Thailand, many English teachers are acquainted with most of the approaches except for order of acquisition approach and functional grammar. In the order of acquisition approach, the idea is that a foreign language should be taught after the order of a native speaking person acquiring his or her language. Various research methods such as different types of testing have been administered to different groups of informants to examine the order of linguistic features acquired. However, the research results are inconclusive.

Functional grammar is developed from Halliday’s (1973) systemic approach, which is composed of ideational, interpersonal and textual functions.

These two approaches have recently arrived in Thailand through people who have been trained overseas. Yet, they are not well-known among Thai teachers.

The practice of English teaching in Thailand is as follows:

In grammar-translation, the characteristics of the approach are as follows:

1. Explanations of grammar are rule-oriented.
2. Separate skills are taught
3. Students’ native language is used as a means of instruction
4. Grammatical usage is focused. Errors are not tolerated.

**Criticisms**

1. Rules are borrowed from Latin. They are not practical.
2. Students who know rules cannot use the language.
3. Students cannot integrate the skills taught. For example, they cannot apply what they have learned in their reading to writing.

Grammar-translation is harshly criticized, yet it is widely practiced in Thailand because it is easy for the teacher to explain the English grammar rules in Thai.
As a reaction to the grammar-translation approach, the communicative approach is recommended, for example, in teaching English 101 and 102 at Srinakharinwirot University. The approach is briefly described as follows:

1. The content is sequenced by linguistic functions such as greetings, telephoning, shopping etc.
2. Meaningful communication and practical use of language are focused.
3. Integrated skills are taught.
4. Implicit explanations of grammar are given.

The following example is taken from New interchange I by Jack Richards (1997). In unit 9, the functions are asking and describing people’s appearance; identifying people. All listening, speaking and other activities are involved with the above linguistic functions. However, as it is the first book of the series, the reading and writing activities are rather limited (Richards, 1997: 18–9).

Criticisms

1. Exercises are too steep. Only a limited number of exercises are devoted to the teaching of each skill. Then they move on to another step.
2. Students cannot generalize rules from the exercises. Students who have learned a grammatical structure cannot use it in some other contexts.
3. Written exercises are limited because learning activities must be oriented to listening, speaking and reading as well.
4. Errors are tolerated if they do not impede the communication. As a result, broken English is frequently found because students falsely assume that they can ignore grammaticality.
5. Most of the activities are oral; therefore, the students cannot retain what they have learned in their long-term memory.

Many Thai teachers say that the communicative approach has a very harmful effect on the English teaching in Thailand. Thai students produce broken English; yet, they are not aware of the errors they make.

As an attempt to teach the students after their psychological process, the process and interactive approaches are proposed. They are used mostly to teach reading and writing. The basic assumptions of the approaches are as follows:

1. Learning is a cognitive process in which a teacher can intervene.
2. The cognitive process is recursive. Students are encouraged to write and revise
drafts and in reading, to read and reread.

3. Learning is an interactive process among the text, teacher and the student. Therefore, the students are encouraged to respond to the reading text according to their background knowledge.

4. Summary writing can be used to bridge reading and writing.

5. Errors are idiosyncratic; therefore, a one-to-one conference between the teacher and the student is recommended.

Criticisms

1. It is time-consuming

2. It works with a small group of students.

Mass Education

All approaches work best with small groups of students. However, problems in Thailand exist because English is taught as mass education.

1. In big classes, students do not receive frequent and appropriate feedback from the teacher.

2. The university entrance exam is a major influence to orient the teaching and assessing tasks in English to be of a multiple-choice type.

3. Writing is not feasible for a big class. Without writing, the teaching of English tends to fail.

4. Because of the teaching load and other administrative tasks, teachers are overwhelmed.

5. With big classes and a heavy workload, the salary is not attractive enough to draw in many competent teachers.

Buddha says in the process of learning, a student should listen, think, ask and then write. However, in mass education where writing is mostly left out, the process of learning is not complete. It also explains why English teaching is a failure in this country.

The Outlook of English Teaching in Thailand

There are many attempts to address the problems.

1. At the university level, the number of credits for English for general education is increased from 6–12. Six are devoted to general education (foundation courses) and the other six for English for specific purposes or academic English.

2. In the mainstream education, a learner-centered approach is stipulated, but without extensive training and facilities such as a resourceful library or teachers’ assistants to assist the teachers, it is hard to to achieve the
goal set.

3. There are attempts to get rid of the multiple-choice exam. Teachers are stipulated to ask essay questions in exams. However, they do not have any assistant to help them grade the students’ papers.

4. Attempts have been made to encourage the teaching of writing in the secondary school. For example, essay questions are encouraged. As usual, no teaching assistance is mentioned to relieve the teacher’s burden.

5. The curriculum and teaching must be answerable to internal and external quality assurance and reporting. The teachers are expected to assume full responsibility for the quality assurance report. As such the teacher’s responsibility has increased tremendously.

It seems that all the attempts to address the English teaching problems have increased the Thai teachers’ workload. Therefore, Thai teachers are skeptical if the measures proposed will be effective.

Paradigm Shift

There is a paradigm shift for the whole government system. Subsidization for universities and schools is shifted from full to limited. In older days, education was fully supported by the government. Now, higher education institutions are allowed to collect higher tuition and fees so that they can support themselves. In other words, it is difficult to ask for a full supply of teachers and a budget for some teaching equipment. The policy is that higher educational programs should be self-sustainable.

Opportunity

With such a policy, self-sustainable programs are encouraged. For example, a joint program with a foreign university is allowed. Tuition and fees can be collected at a higher rate.

In short, there are many reasons why teaching English in Thailand is considered difficult. First of all, the linguistic discrepancies between English and Thai are so vast that they have become a major obstacle for many Thai students to learn English successfully. Another difficulty is that mass education is not appropriate for teaching English. Without proper feedback from the teacher and without written practice, the students are confused by English grammatical rules and thus resort to Thai, which is extremely different from English. With such a vicious circle, teaching English in Thailand is an uphill battle. However, the outlook is not so bleak. There are attempts to change the curriculum, and there are opportunities for educational institutions to propose quality programs as an alternative for Thai people. Consequently, if money is raised from the quality programs, more competent teachers can be hired for regular program students and thus this opportunity will enable the Thai students to acquire better English.
References


