

## English Language Policy and English Language Teaching Practice in Thailand: A Perfect Match or A Mismatch?

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### Abstract

English is a mandatory subject for the entire basic education core curriculum from Prathomsuksa 1 to Matayomsuksa 6 in the 2008 Basic Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008). With the concern and focus on English for communication, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has been widely implemented. Conversely, English Language Teaching (ELT) practice in Thailand seems to be far from being successful since the Thai students' English language proficiency was low as shown in the summary report of Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) in the Academic Year 2017, and Thailand was ranked 64 out of 88 (EF EPI, 2018). However, it could be arguable that the Thai students' low English language proficiency was resulted from being assessed based on native-speaker (NS) norms, not exactly on communicative ability. Consequently, a gap between the English language policy and ELT in Thailand, especially the students' proficiency assessment, was found. An intriguing and thought-provoking question that needs to be addressed was raised whether the rank of English language proficiency that Thai students received really represents their actual language proficiency since the illustration was drawn from the statistical data of test takers who took decontextualized multiple-choice NS-based standardized tests.

**Keywords:** *English language policy, English language teaching, Communicative English Teaching*

### บทคัดย่อ

ภาษาอังกฤษถูกจัดให้เป็นรายวิชาบังคับในหลักสูตรแกนกลางสำหรับการศึกษาขั้นพื้นฐานตั้งแต่ระดับประถมศึกษาปีที่ 1 จนถึงมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 6 (Ministry of Education, 2008) การเรียนการสอนภาษาเพื่อการสื่อสารได้ถูกนำมาใช้อย่างแพร่หลายด้วยการเน้นให้ผู้เรียนมีทักษะในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร แต่อย่างไรก็ตาม แต่ในทางกลับกัน การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทยดูเหมือนจะห่างไกลจากความสำเร็จ เพราะความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนไทยอยู่ในระดับต่ำ จากสรุปผลคะแนนการทดสอบทางการศึกษาระดับชาตินั้นพื้นฐาน (O-NET) ปีการศึกษา 2560 ที่คะแนนเฉลี่ยรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนอยู่ในเกณฑ์ต่ำกว่าร้อยละ 50 และประเทศไทยถูกจัดให้อยู่ในลำดับที่ 64 จาก 88 ประเทศผู้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ (EF EPI, 2018) แต่จากการจัดระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษนี้สามารถโต้แย้งได้ว่าระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนไทยที่ถูกประเมินว่าอยู่ในระดับต่ำนั้นถูกประเมินบนบรรทัดฐานความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของเจ้าของภาษา ไม่ใช่จากความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาเพื่อการสื่อสาร ดังนั้น จึงสามารถสรุปได้ว่ายังมีช่องว่างระหว่างนโยบายด้านภาษาอังกฤษและการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง ด้านการประเมินความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียน เนื่องจากนักเรียนถูกประเมินบนเกณฑ์บรรทัดฐานของเจ้าของภาษา ไม่ใช่ความสามารถทางการสื่อสารที่แท้จริง คำถามที่น่าสนใจที่จำเป็นต้องหาคำตอบก็คือระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษที่นักเรียนไทยได้รับนั้นแสดงถึงความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษที่แท้จริงของนักเรียนหรือไม่ เพราะการ

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จัดลำดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษนั้นใช้ข้อมูลทางสถิติของผู้สอบข้อสอบมาตรฐานที่เป็นข้อสอบแบบปรนัย ไม่มีบริบท และถูกออกแบบบนบรรทัดฐานของเจ้าของภาษา

**คำสำคัญ:** นโยบายด้านภาษาอังกฤษ การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ การสอนภาษาเพื่อการสื่อสาร

## Introduction

In the currently globalized world, it is inevitable that English is widely used as the main medium of communication when people from different backgrounds come into contact. English is also used in a wide range of domains such as education, business, industries, and entertainment. Dewey and Leung (2010) stated that English is now a common linguistic resource for communication for many more international speakers than its native speakers. This is absolutely true. An example use of English as a main medium of communication among non-native speakers (NNSs) is clearly illustrated in the Southeast Asia region. English has been considered the medium of communication among people from the ten-member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand (Kirkpatrick. 2010; Baker. 2012), and ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation (including China, Japan, and South Korea) (Baker, 2012). Hence, it could be said that English is the only official working language in ASEAN Community and ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation (Baker & Jarunthawatchai. 2017).

As a member of ASEAN Community, Thailand's government has invested both resources and time to accelerate its citizen's English proficiency to be competitive with those from other member states (Wannachotphawate. 2015; Baker & Jarunthawatchai. 2017). Establishment of alternative education policies has been done as a result of an attempt to improve Thai students' English proficiency (Wannachotphawate. 2015). The announcement that 2012 was the "English Speaking Year" was also initiated to enhance the use of English and encourage the improvement of Thai students' English proficiency (Baker & Jarunthawatchai. 2017). Even though most of the Thai citizens have realized the importance of English, a large number of the Thai students seem to be unable to develop their English proficiency, and their levels of proficiency tend to be far from satisfaction. The results of the Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) of English of Prathomsuksa 6, Matayomsuksa 3 and Matayomsuksa 6 (equivalent to Grade 6, Grade 9, and Grade 12, respectively) revealed that the average score of each group was very low; 36.34% for Prathomsuksa 6, 30.45% for Matayomsuksa 3, and 28.31% for Matayomsuksa 6 (National Institute of Educational Testing Service. 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Furthermore, according to Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index (EPI), Thailand ranked 64 out of 88 with a ranking of low proficiency (EF EPI. 2018). When looking into an Educational Testing Service (ETS) report on test and score data summary for Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-Based Test (TOEFL iBT) from January 2017 to December 2017, it was also revealed that the mean score of the test takers whose first language (L1) is Thai was obviously lower than many of the test takers whose L1s are other than Thai (ETS. 2017). Hence, it is not overstated that improving Thai students' English proficiency seems to be such a failure despite continuous and extreme attempts.

With such dissatisfaction with the Thai students' English language proficiency, it is skeptical why this has happened. In order to get the problem solved, where should all of the Thai stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, administrators, and policymakers, start? Consequently, in this paper, I would like to explore the causes and effects of English language policy in Thailand and how such the policy affects the English language teaching (ELT) practice in the country. To unpack the complexity, a brief historical background of English in Thailand is reviewed, followed by the status of English in Thailand. The current English language policy in the Thai educational system

and how such the policy affects ELT practices are also scrutinized. Finally, suggestions toward an appropriate ELT practice in the Thai context from the side of a practitioner will be given.

### English in Thailand

Despite being a non-colonized country, English has a long history in Thailand. According to historical accounts (Wongsothon, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs. 2002; Foley. 2005; Darasawang. 2007; Baker & Jarunthawatchai. 2017; Trakulkasemsuk. 2018), English language teaching (ELT) in the country has been performed for more than a century. The language was first introduced and used in the reign of King Rama III (1824-1851) by an American missionary whose aimed was to evangelize Christianity. Although the missionary was not successful in evangelism, he brought English to the Thai people. King Rama IV (1851-1868) studied the language himself to deal with the threat of Western colonization. He was the first king who could master the language fluently. English gained a pivotal role as the most prestigious foreign language in the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). During that time, there were a lot of foreigners coming to Thailand, and King Rama V believed that English was the key to modernization. In addition, in order to be a modernized country, it required Thai people to learn a foreign language and study abroad. Those who were proficient in English were given with the “King’s Scholarships” to study abroad. The Ministry of Education (MOE) was also founded, and more schools were established giving more opportunities to commoners to attend and be educated at schools. The first university in Thailand was established during the reign of King Rama VI (1910-1925) who was educated in Europe and wanted to promote Western-style education in Thailand. For the basic educational system, a Compulsory Education Act was issued with the requirement that all children aged between 4 and 8 attended school, and English was a mandatory subject after Prathomsuksa 4 (equivalent to Grade 4). Being a compulsory subject at school, English received a large amount of attention, and the time allocation for English teaching was as many as seven and a half hours a week.

A big change happened in the reign of King Rama VII when the political system changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932. The new government emphasized the offering of equal education to all Thais. The educational plan was extended to the tertiary level which was categorized into two programs, namely Art Program and Science Program. At the tertiary level, Art program students were mandated to study English and other foreign languages, such as French or Japanese. Every university student was required to study English in 1955. There was a noticeably temporary shift of English from being a compulsory subject to an elective one in the 1978 National Education Curriculum. In spite of the fact that English was kept as an elective subject at all levels, most of the students studied English. A dramatic change took place again in 1996 when English was a compulsory subject for all primary pupils from Prathomsuksa 1 (equivalent to Grade 1).

The enactment of the National Education Act in 1999 was considered the most significant education reform in Thailand. According to the Act, all Thai children have an equal right to access to 12-year free education, starting from Prathomsuksa 1 to Matayomsuksa 6, equivalent to Grade 1 to Grade 12 (Office of the National Education Commission. 1999: Section 2). Although English was not obviously stated in the Act, English language policy and ELT in Thailand have been radically influenced. English remains the most commonly taught foreign language. Pupils from Prathomsuksa 1 to Matayomsuksa 12 are required to study English as a mandatory subject. University students are also obligated to take at least 12 credits of English courses before graduation.

Regarding the historical accounts above, English has a long history in Thailand. It is not a colonial language in the country (Bennui & Hashim. 2014), but it has retained, as Baker and Jarunthawatchai (2017) stated, the *de*

*facto* primary foreign language for the Thai students. Moreover, English is widely used in various domains all over the country.

### **The Status of English in Thailand**

In the past, English held a prime status as a language of nobility and marker of social status, and the use of English was restricted to the elite. Exposure to English of Thai commoners was very limited since most of the Thai children in rural areas rarely had a chance to go to schools even though the basic education was obligatory (Trakulkasemsuk. 2018). However, the status of the language has been changed. At the present time, English is used widely in different domains such as international business, audio-visual products (TV and radio programs, films, and music), tourism, education, academic publications, internet communication (Foley. 2005), and the realization of the good knowledge of English is not a luxury but a necessity (Baker & Jarunthawatchai. 2017). Still, the use of the language among Thai people is rarely observed and seems to be limited to urban middle-class to upper-class Thais (Trakulkasemsuk. 2018).

In the Thai education system, English has been considered a foreign language (EFL). The implication of the EFL notion consequently results in the unconscious conformity to the native-speaker (NS) norms. Cook (1999) stated that the NS model still remains firmly established in ELT and second language acquisition research (SLA), and achievement in English language learning is compared with NS competence. Hence, it is inevitable that Thai students have a preference and a positive attitude toward the native-like English proficiency, and an assumption can be made that in order to be considered proficient in English, Thai students must perform a native-like English ability.

Looking into the context of Thailand as a member of ASEAN Community and ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation, English is used mainly for communication among ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three citizens whose mother-tongues are not English. Since the main purpose of English use is for communication among NNSs, it is reasonable to say that English holds a status as a lingua franca (ELF) in the region as defined by Firth (1996), Kirkpatrick (2010), Seidlhofer (2005), and Jenkins (2012); *“English as a Lingua Franca is a contact language among people who do not share the same mother-tongue or background and as a foreign language chosen for international communication.”* Being used as a lingua franca, it is unavoidable that non-native English varieties and norms have currently become common in the region, and ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three citizens, including Thais, as ELF users have different levels of English proficiency, ranging from high to low.

Referring to the two different uses of English in Thailand, it could be said that English has a status as a foreign language in the Thai education system, while in a communicative context, it holds status as a lingua franca. The two different facets of English in Thailand have a strong impact on ELT practice. Trakulkasemsuk's (2018) study interestingly reported that Thai English users stated that they could communicate with foreigners in their workplace without serious problems, but they would not teach or use English with their children, being afraid that their children's English would be like theirs. This means that while Thai English users feel quite confident when they communicate in English, they still prefer more native-like English proficiency and rely on NS norms for their children's English learning.

### **Current English Language Education Policy in Thailand**

There is not an apparent mention of English language learning in the 1999 National Education Act. Language learning and teaching are mentioned in the 2010 additionally revised version of the Act in Section 4 Learning

Arrangements and Provisions. Under Section 4, there is an item which states that learning arrangements and provisions must focus on knowledge and skills of mathematics and language, as well as the correct use of Thai language (Office of the National Education Commission. 2010: Section 4). Even though the term “language” is not directly referred to English, it could be taken for granted that to mean English. Looking into the 2008 Basic Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education. 2008) under the section of “Strands and Standards”, foreign language learning contents and standardized indices are explained. When studying a more detailed explanation in the section of “Learning Areas of Foreign Languages” (p.252), it is found that the term “foreign language” includes a wide variety of languages, such as English, French, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and so on, and English is stated clearly to be a prescribed subject for the entire basic education core curriculum from Prathomsuksa 1 to Matayomsuksa 6.

In Higher Education (HE), a portion out of 30 credits of General Education (GE) courses is allocated to foreign language learning, and English is the most studied one even though it is, again, not stated clearly in the 2005 Government Gazette (Ministry of Education. 2005). In spite of being vaguely stated under the term of “foreign language”, English is currently a required subject that all undergraduate students have to study for at least 12 credits before graduation. Recently, the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) announced the policy to standardize Thai undergraduate students in April 2016 (Office of Higher Education Commission. 2016). The announcement requires that (1) all universities specify their own English language policy and goals to standardize their students’ English language proficiency, (2) all the universities provide an English standardized plan accordingly to the specified policy, (3) all the universities revise their English learning and teaching provisions and focus on students’ achievements based on the specified goals, (4) all the universities provide extra curricula, activities, teaching materials, teaching aids, and/or environment that support English language learning, and (5) all the universities consider and decide to construct their own standardized tests or implement a commercial standardized test to examine their students’ English language proficiency. However, the students’ levels of English proficiency they receive after taking the test do not have an impact on their graduation.

The status of English in the Thai educational systems, both basic and higher education, has been clearer, and the emphasis on English learning has also clearly demonstrated how important English is in the current world of globalization. Wongsothon, Hiranburana, and Chinnawongs (2002) asserted that Thais need knowledge of English to satisfy their personal, academic and occupational needs. Baker and Jarunthawatchai (2017) also added that Thais’ English language proficiency is a significant tool to access to the advancement of knowledge, to engage in ASEAN community, and to enhance the competitiveness of the nation.

### **English Language Teaching in Thailand**

Traditional methods in English teaching, such as rote memorization and grammar translation, have long been employed in Thailand (Wongsothon, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs. 2002; Darasawang. 2007), and emphasis was placed on the receptive skills of listening and speaking (Wongsothon, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs. 2002). Successful learners usually won scholarships to study abroad and served as high-rank government officials when they returned to Thailand. However, most learners were not successful language users (Darasawang. 2007).

Darasawang (2007) continued to report that the reading aloud technique with correct pronunciation was introduced during the political reform in 1932. The grammar translation method was still focused on. A change in ELT from the grammar-translation method to the aural-oral method started in the 1950s. A traditional method of grammar-translation was continually used despite the launching of new curricula requiring students to learn English

as a medium of international communication and to acquire knowledge of the world. Then, comes the focus on practical communication, life-long learning, and learner-centeredness. This resulted in the setting up of the National Scheme of Education in 1977 causing a change in the curricula again. English courses were planned to be more meaningful and practical.

It could be seen that approaches to ELT in Thailand have been changed in order to accommodate and satisfy Thai students' purposes of English learning with the hope that all of them will be successful English language users in the future. This seems to be reasonable referring to Norton and Toohey's (2001) statement that it is believed that a successful second (L2) learner occupies a combination of interests, inclination, skills, temperament, needs, and motivations; therefore, students' differences and the development of thinking processes have been considered. In association with such the change, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was popularized and widely implemented since English teachers believed that the approach would satisfy the notion of learner-centeredness and enhance autonomous and independent learning (Wongsothon, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs. 2002; Foley. 2005; Darasawang. 2007; Baker & Jarunthawatchai. 2017). Since then, CLT has played an important role in ELT in Thailand for decades.

The reform of English learning and teaching started when the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) launched a new English learning and teaching policy in the basic education system in 2017. According to the policy, English teaching and learning needs to be transformed from the grammar-translation method to CLT, starting from listening, speaking, reading, and writing, respectively. It is also stated that provisions of English learning should be based on the similar nature of first language acquisition which starts from listening to sounds, making a connection between sounds and pictures, and imitating the utterances. The whole process will finally lead to the process of reading and writing (Office of the Basic Education Commission. 2014: 10). Many schools have actively responded to the policy by opening a new Mini English Program (MEP) or English Program (EP) class, but some schools, especially those in rural areas, seem to face difficulties responding to the policy.

However, the implementation of CLT with the hope to encourage Thai students to be successful English communicators seems to face some difficulties since there is no real use of the language outside the classroom settings. Consequently, based on Cook's (1999: 187-188) definition of language learners and users, it could be said that Thai students have been and still are in the stage of being only L2 learners. This is because they do not use or do not have a chance to use the language outside the classroom. Furthermore, Standard Thai which is the only national and official language of the nation has been used as the main medium language of instruction of every subject with no exception to the English language. This is a major barrier that ELT in Thailand has faced for a long time.

Considering the status of English in the Thai education system, with the notion of English as a foreign language, the conformity of native English models is accepted. Students' English language proficiency is evaluated and assessed based on native models. Hence, in order to be successful language learners, Thai students have to acquire the four skills of native-like English. While the implementation of CLT hopes to involve the students' in performing tasks and encourage them to be independent learners to meet the real-world needs, being evaluated and assessed their language performance based on the native models is absolutely unfair and unachievable to the students as Cook (1999: 204) stated that L2 learners' battle to become native speakers is lost before it has begun. He also added that if the aim of English teaching is to create English language users, the description of English that is logically required is a description of L2 English.

### **English Policy and ELT Practice in Thailand: A Perfect Match or A Mismatch?**

The enactment of the National Education Act in 1999 has had a great impact on English language policy, and the student-centered model has also been emphasized. Students' differences, interests, aptitudes, and thinking process have also become the main emphasis when lesson plans are designed. As stated earlier, the transformation from a grammar-translation method to CLT has encouraged English teachers to change their teaching styles and provide more opportunities for the students to learn independently. They also believe that active involvement in assigned tasks will enhance the students' learning autonomy and independence. Improvement of Thai students' English proficiency to the level that they can use English for communication in the globalized and highly competitive world has relied so much on the CLT approach.

Even though some English teachers have widely implemented the CLT approach since they believe that the CLT principles correspond to the concept of "learner-centeredness", there is a remarkable question if those English teachers are qualified and have enough training to use ELT approach appropriately (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). Noticeably, English teachers' inadequate speaking skills, students' low language proficiency, lack of proper teacher training, and cultural dispositions are among the factors that constrain any effective implementation of CLT (F. Zhang & Liu, 2014 as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2014: 9). At the same time, a number of English teachers still use the traditional method of grammar-translation in their English classes. Hence, it tends to be a controversy between English education policy and ELT practice in Thailand.

Another significant issue is the students' English proficiency assessment. Multiple-choice tests have been used in almost every English class with no exception to the English-speaking class. National tests, such as O-NET and GAT (General Aptitude Test), are designed to measure Thai students' English proficiency levels, specifically GAT that is to assess academic proficiency of Matayomsuksa 6 students before being admitted to tertiary education. Both of the tests are formatted in the multiple-choice style which aims to measure only the grammar and reading skills, but not the listening and speaking skills. In a broader scale, students' English proficiency is assessed through international standardized tests, including TOEFL and IELTS, and in order to prepare the students to pass all the standardized tests, the teachers have to base their ELT practices on the Center-based ELT establishments (Canagarajah, 1999) which, in this case, means the NS models. Considering the tools that have been used to measure the students' English proficiency and how those tools are formatted, it is found that the students are being measured based on the NS norms, and how they are assessed is controversial to the CLT policy. The intention of the implementation of a CLT approach is to encourage the students to learn the language for the main purpose of communication, but how their levels of proficiency are being measured seems to deviate from the set goal.

Looking into English language education policy, the ELT practice, and proficiency assessment, it is found that there is a considerable gap that needs to be filled. The coordination of the policy, the ELT practices, and assessment is extremely required.

### **Conclusion**

Having reviewed the historical accounts of English in Thailand, its status, English language policy, the ELT practices, and proficiency assessments, a relatively big gap is found. Considering the status of English is as a foreign language in the educational system and a lingua franca in use, the current policy is made accordingly. However, the translation of the policy into classroom practices need to be adjusted, and most importantly all the stakeholders need

to take it seriously. For ELT practices, as Cook (1999) suggested, more emphasis should be placed on the students as potential and actual L2 users and concern with the NS norms should be less. In addition, if the students are persuaded with the advantages of English as a necessary tool to gain access to knowledge and professional advancement, modern technology, and communication, more students might be motivated to achieve higher levels of English proficiency. Furthermore, a focus should also be put on enhancing the students' realization of their uniqueness as English learners and users that their errors are not representing their language deficiency (Cook, 1999), but they are seen as proof that the students, at any given point in language development, occupy some forms of systematic linguistic competence (Corder, 1981 as cited in Block, 2003).

The illustration of Thai students' low proficiency of English has been drawn from the results of the standardized tests that are designed according to the NS norms. Baker and Jarunthawatchai (2017) suggested that authorities need to make sure that any standardized tests are chosen appropriately to the local contexts of the students, including academic disciplines, potential interlocutors, and objectives of taking the test either for academic or professional purposes. Since the language policy emphasizes communicative learning, the assessment of students' English language proficiency should not be based on the NS norms. Even though it is quite complicated, authentic assessments, such as interviews, videos, journals, speeches, and so on, should be exploited more.

Lastly, does the rank of English proficiency that Thai students received really represent their actual language proficiency? Generally speaking, Thai students' low English language proficiency might not actually be as low as it is presented since the illustration was drawn from the statistical data of test takers who took multiple-choice NS-based standardized tests. Once the students have a chance to be assessed in various forms of assessment, they might show surprisingly satisfactory levels of English language proficiency.

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