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**SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (SLA)**  
**AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT)**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, the author discusses second language acquisition (SLA) as it pertains to English language teaching (ELT) in the Thai context. First, he presents the definitions of SLA and ELT. Second, based on a review of selected SLA theories, he provides insights into a long-standing problem i.e. why a few Thais succeed and many fail in learning English. In doing so, he provides a characterization of ELT in Thailand. He concludes the paper by suggesting trends in research and teaching vis-à-vis English language teaching in Thailand.

**Introduction**

How and why few Thai people succeed and many fail in “getting” English is of interest to both experts and lay people alike. While lay people may attribute the causes of failure of Thai people learning English to the fact that Thailand has never been colonized, that claim is meant only to be jocular. However, there are groups of theorists keenly interested in varied abilities of second language learners (L2 learners) in “getting” the target language (L2). They hold certain beliefs about how L2 should be taught and learned. Such beliefs have been translated into proposed theories encompassing such diverse fields as linguistics,

education, psychology, and culture. In this article, I proceed by discussing the nuts and bolts of second language acquisition (SLA). In so doing, I give the definition of SLA and relevant details that demarcate the parameters of SLA. Next, I briefly discuss ELT in general and English as a foreign language (EFL) in Thailand in particular. I conclude the article by suggesting research and teaching trends in SLA and ELT Thai EFL teachers at all levels should heed.

According to Ellis (1997), SLA refers to attempts by L2 learners—both children and adults—in acquiring/learning an additional language that is not their first in formal and informal settings. This definition of SLA is greatly influenced by knowledge and research in such diverse fields as linguistics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, discourse analysis, language education, pragmatics, and ELT. Being interdisciplinary in nature, SLA aims to disentangle knotty problems of L2 learners trying to acquire/learn an L2. As such, SLA researchers focus their attention on the kind of language that L2 learners produce in speech and writing—their interlanguage, a term coined by Selinker in 1972.

Just as language is rule-governed and systematic, so is interlanguage. Ellis (1997) and Tarone (1979) suggest that L2 learners produce their L2 with systematic errors and mistakes. These errors and mistakes have been found to follow certain routes and sequences. That is, unlike the contrastive analysis tradition which regards errors and mistakes as ‘sins’ to be redeemed, interlanguage researchers consider errors and mistakes as ‘resources’ to enrich one’s understanding of how people proceed in acquiring/learning an L2. Moreover, L2 learner language also shows some stylistic variability similar to that found in first language acquisition. To begin with, studies on interlanguage allude to linguistics, notably syntax, in explaining errors and mistakes produced by L2 learners. One of the focuses of such studies is on the acquisition of relative clauses in English by various L2 learners e.g. Arab, Japanese, and Chinese students.

### **The parameters of SLA**

In accounting for L2 acquisition/learning processes and given the fact that SLA is concerned first and foremost with the interlanguage processes, SLA draws on a wide array of knowledge such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, and education. Therefore, SLA must necessarily have broad parameters. I will first explain the linguistic aspects of interlanguage. Then, I will focus on non-linguistic aspects such as social and discourse aspects of interlanguage.

It is suggested that L2 learners undergo more or less the same order of acquisition of an L2 (Ellis, 1997). For example, L2 learners of English have a tendency to acquire the “-ing” form of a verb before they do the “-ed” form regardless of their L1’s. Moreover, their L2 development is far from straightforward, but reflecting a “u-shaped course of development” (Ellis, 1997). That is, learners may get the right form right initially only to lapse later when their L2 language contains ungrammatical structures, although their interlanguage grammar may indicate the eventual development. This non-linear characteristic of learner language indicates that L2 learners do not come to the language class empty-headed. Rather, they assign “rules” and “meaning” to their new linguistic experiences. Thus, the traditional view that there is transfer of their L1 grammar to their L2 is not necessarily correct across the board.

Of equal importance, from the linguistic perspective, is the notion of markedness. It is assumed that unmarked (regular) grammatical structures are easier to understand, and hence easier to acquire than marked (irregular) structures. Therefore, to facilitate student learning, L2 instruction should proceed from unmarked to marked structures. For example, in teaching the English verb “break,” the teacher should first provide students with examples containing the regular meaning of the verb (e.g. He broke a mirror) before attempting the irregular meaning (e.g. He broke his promise). Markedness applies to all levels of linguistic and SLA analyses (i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics).

In addition to the aforementioned acquisition order and markedness, the linguistic perspective, notably Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG), has extended to SLA processes. That is, Chomsky has always suggested that first language acquisition is invariably a success story because children acquiring their L1 have full access to UG. It is UG that is responsible for how L1 speakers sort out the grammatical rules of their L1. Moreover, UG explains why fossilization does not occur in L1 acquisition. UG also accounts for why L2 learners attempting to acquire an L2 are usually not successful. That is, those people do not have access to UG and simply rely on learning strategies which do not appear to lead them to success.

Drawing on UG, Krashen (1985) proposes the comprehensible input hypothesis (CI). He suggests that learners acquire an L2 only when they are presented with meaningful and contextualized language input at the  $i + 1$  level where  $i$  refers to the current level of competence and  $i + 1$  refers to language a little beyond the  $i$  level or "next level of competence" (Lee, 1998, p. 33). To optimize acquisition, Krashen further argues, the input should be comprehensible, relevant, interesting, sufficient, and presented in a situation that encourages a low filter setting (i.e. encouraging positive attitudinal factors). For Krashen, comprehension is the most important element, for it offers a panacea for all linguistic deficiencies. One of the important corollaries of his assertion is that grammatical sequencing is neither necessary nor desirable; grammar will emerge with sufficient comprehensible input.

Based upon the above tenets, Krashen firmly believes that speaking is the result of acquisition and not its cause. This means that speech cannot be taught directly but emerges on its own because of building competence via comprehensible input (Ellis, 1990). Moreover, he argues that necessary grammar points are automatically provided if input is understood and if there is enough of it. On this point, Krashen (1985) asserts that "when the filter is 'down' and appropriate comprehensible input is presented and comprehended, acquisition is inevitable" (p. 4). In sum, Krashen strongly believes that it is acquisition rather than learning that leads to real communication. According to Krashen, acquisition means an unconscious process that occurs when an

individual tries to understand input containing a structure, and learning refers to the development of conscious explicit knowledge of grammar. In this sense, learning and acquisition are considered entirely separate systems, and more importantly, learning never leads to acquisition.

Considering the distinction between acquisition and learning grounded in the Input Hypothesis, obvious implications for teaching are as follows. First, the teacher must necessarily provide as much comprehensible input as possible through visual aids and a wider range of lexical items rather than through the study of syntactic structures. Second, he/she should focus on listening and reading skills while allowing speaking to emerge. Third, he/she should provide a relaxed classroom atmosphere in order to lower the affective filter. More specifically, CI views teaching an L2 as the teaching that does not focus on grammar “by the language teacher, by the language learner, or in language teaching materials” (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p. 131).

Although CI was proposed over two decades ago and despite a plethora of SLA studies that have been advanced to criticize it, Krashen (1998) still adamantly clings to his deep-rooted position that only comprehensible input is needed for language acquisition to take place. As Gass (1997) aptly puts it, “[comprehensible input] is believed [by Krashen] to be the sine qua non of acquisition” (p. 134).

From the non-linguistic perspective, learning an L2 is much like learning any other skill. That is, L2 learners must do something with the input to which they are exposed. For example, Swain (1985) suggests that L2 learners must have ample opportunity to produce their L2 (or output) if they are to make satisfactory progress, especially if they are to become more accurate. Swain further explains that the output hypothesis (CO) has three functions to play in L2 acquisition/learning: 1) the noticing/triggering function; 2) the hypothesis-testing function; and 3) the metalinguistic function.

First, it is hypothesized that CO leads to noticing. That is, in producing an L2, learners may come across a linguistic problem that may force them to notice what they do not know, or know

only partially. As such, learners are prompted "...to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems" (p. 19). In other words, the activity of producing an L2 may make them aware of something they need to find out about their L2.

Second, concerning the hypothesis-testing function, Swain posits that L2 learners' errors in written and spoken forms "reveal hypotheses held by them about how the target language works. To test a hypothesis, learners need to do something and one way of doing this is to say or write something" (p. 131). In short, learners may use their output (both spoken and written) as a means of testing out new language forms and structures in order to stretch their interlanguage to fulfill communicative needs.

Third, as for the metalinguistic or reflective function, Swain asserts that, in outputting, L2 learners use language to "negotiate about form." This means that under certain task conditions (e.g. a communicative task), learners will not only reveal their hypotheses about their L2, but reflect upon them, using language to do so. "It is this 'level' of output that represents its metalinguistic function of using language to reflect on language, allowing learners to control and internalize it" (p. 132). Regarding these three functions, an important conclusion can be drawn that "...there are two ways to promote interlanguage restructuring: production of output plus feedback, and production of output plus metatalk" (Doughty and Williams, 1998, p. 238).

Based upon the overview of CO above, it appears that the essence of comprehensible output lies in the fact that learners are provided with opportunity to talk and write in order to learn, and that it is the learners themselves who "take responsibility for their own learning" (Swain, 1985, p. 159).

Implications of CO for L2 learning are as follows. It is necessary for L2 learners to have considerable in-class opportunities for speaking and writing (outputting). This could be accomplished by "pushing" learners to make use of their resources. That is, learners must have their linguistic abilities stretched to the fullest. This necessitates, among other things, the reflection on their output and modification of such output to enhance comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy.

Swain suggests that teacher-led and collaboratively structured sessions can make these goals attainable.

In sum, Swain's position regarding CO does not completely reject the importance of Krashen's CI. Rather, CO was proposed to extend CI. That is, while Krashen apparently polarizes the issue of whether CI or CO leads to ultimate acquisition, Swain does not go to extremes. Instead, she realistically argued that "when language use is considered as communication, the concepts of input, comprehensible input, and comprehensible output are appropriate metaphors because they conjure up images of messages" (Swain and Lapkin, 1998, p. 320). This non-bifurcated argument strongly supports Lantolf's (1996) position that we have to "let all the flowers bloom," with flowers symbolizing theories/beliefs/models. This is because "you never know which ones will catch the eye to become tomorrow's realities" (p. 739).

It should be noted that although Swain's output hypothesis appears more realistic than Krashen's input hypothesis, both hypotheses are limited in their explanatory powers because they compare learners to computers rather than real learners. Thus, it is suggested that the computational metaphor be replaced by the "participation" metaphor through the notion of "collaborative dialog" (Swain, 2000).

As another example of the non-linguistic perspective, "collaborative dialog" is meant to bridge the gap between CI and CO. Collaborative dialog is knowledge-building dialog in which L2 learners assist one another in their learning, focusing on both form and meaning. Through collaborative dialog, L2 learners are able to use both input and output in a realistic manner. This kind of dialog reflects learner autonomy as popularized in the literature. It is through collaborative dialog that learners get to have real interaction using their L2, and they can do so without being judged to be correct or wrong by the teacher. This participation metaphor, it is believed, should enable L2 learners to realize that L2 acquisition/learning is a lived experience of the sort where personal experience and real expectations in L2 mesh.

Another non-linguistic dimension of SLA is the learner. According to Ellis (1997), individual differences in L2 acquisition

are concerned with language aptitude and motivation. By citing John Carroll, Ellis points out that some L2 learners are more capable than others in the following abilities: 1) phonemic coding ability; 2) grammatical sensitivity; 3) inductive language learning ability; and 4) rote learning ability. That is, L2 learners should have all these components of linguistic ability in order to be successful in their L2 acquisition. However, language flair alone is not sufficient, L2 learners need motivation in order to sustain their mastery of the language. Ellis (1997) suggests four major kinds of motivation: 1) instrumental; 2) integrative; 3) resultative; and 4) intrinsic. It is suggested that English as a foreign language students (e.g. Thai students) have instrumental motivation, although some of them may have more than one kind of motivation.

Given the above non-linguistic dimensions of SLA, it is obvious that learning and teaching an L2 are multidimensional and thus require a concerted effort from many parties—teachers, learners, schools, and homes.

In the next section, I discuss the teaching of English in Thailand vis-à-vis the aforementioned SLA theories/hypotheses. In so doing, I discuss communicative language teaching (CLT), one of the current approaches believed to be used by Thai teachers at all levels. This might provide insights into how English should be taught and learned in our country.

### **CLT as a general concept**

Premised on the communicative competence construct, communicative language teaching, or CLT, has been around since the mid-1970s (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrel, 1998). Although giving a standard definition of CLT is not easy because of the many interpretations of the concept (Richards and Rodgers, 2001), Nunan's (1989) overview of CLT methods manifests aspects of CLT that are common to those many definitions:

Communicative Language Teaching views language as a system for the expression of meaning. Activities involve oral communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, and using language which is meaningful to the learner.



Objectives reflect the needs of the learners; they include functional skills as well as linguistic objectives. The learner's role is as a negotiator and interactor. The teacher's role is as a facilitator of the communication process. Materials promote communicative language use; they are task-based and authentic (p. 194).

It can be stated based on the above description that CLT presents a new way of language teaching that distinguishes itself from traditional methods. The aim of CLT is to foster the learner's communicative ability, whereas the goals of traditional teaching methods—the grammar-translation and the audiolingual methods—are to teach the learner structural or grammatical competence and to provide him/her with pattern drills and rote memorization of isolated sentences and contrived dialogues so as to prevent the learner from producing incorrect language forms. As Doughty (1998) puts it, “[in the traditional methods], the belief is that learners, presented with a sequence of forms or functions planned in advance and presented one by one by the teacher or through materials, will eventually build up a complete linguistic repertoire (p. 129)..., [whereas] [c]ommunicative language teaching approaches—that is, theme-based learning, content-based learning, and immersion—have attempted to remedy this problem by giving students more of the talking time and by bringing human experience within the walls of the classroom” (p. 136). In short, while the traditional methods focus on linguistic forms in isolation, CLT focuses on meaning and linguistic forms in context. This is carried out indirectly, for example, through reading and listening to meaningful, comprehensible language input. CLT's de-emphasis on explicit grammar instruction often results in a tolerance of learners' grammatical errors; correction is reserved only for errors in the communication of message meaning (Pica, 2000).

Given the above emphasis of CLT, teachers who favor CLT lend strong support to forms of classroom organization that rely heavily on the use of group/pair work, and changing the role of the teacher to a “facilitator” and for learners as “negotiators of meaning,” being able to exchange communication in the target language. This reflects a more socially symmetric relationship

between the teacher and learners, a radical departure from traditional teaching methods, where the teacher is normally regarded as an unquestioned giver of knowledge and learners as receiving ends who come to class tabula rasa. As Pica (2000) puts it, "in keeping with its learner-centered approach, [the goals of CLT] are focused on students and their success. Its concerns aim toward students' present needs, as well as future, and potential needs for L2 proficiency" (p. 4). Moreover, textbooks to be used in a CLT classroom are supposed to contain "authentic" materials, meaning language items that are used in real life by English native speakers. Some key differences between traditional teaching and CLT approaches are summarized below.

#### **A Comparison of the Traditional Methods and the Communicative Approach**

<b>Traditional Methods</b>	<b>Communicative Language Teaching Approach</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teacher-centered</li><li>• Grammar-focused</li><li>• Rote-memorization</li><li>• Non-authentic materials</li><li>• Explicit and immediate error correction</li><li>• Teacher as authority figure</li><li>• Students as tabula rasa</li><li>• Language in isolation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learner-centered</li><li>• Meaning-focused</li><li>• Meaningful tasks</li><li>• Authentic materials</li><li>• Tolerance of error</li> <li>• Teacher as facilitator</li> <li>• Students as negotiators</li><li>• Language in context</li></ul>

To sum up, common characteristics of CLT are as follows: 1) a focus on message meaning, resulting in language lessons involving communicative functions; 2) the use of authentic materials; 3) learner-centered and experience-based views of L2 acquisition/learning; 4) a focus on meaningful tasks in which learners play the role of negotiators of messages rather than focusing on linguistic items; and 5) the use of pair/group activities

carried out in a learner-friendly atmosphere. Simply put, CLT regards communication both as a process and as the primary goal of second language acquisition/learning. According to Savignon (in press), “[b]y definition, CLT puts the focus on the learner. Learner communicative needs serve as a framework for elaborating program goals in terms of functional competence” (p. 2).

VanPatten (1998) suggests that scholars, instructors, and publishers have varied understandings and interpretations of CLT. For example, for instructors and as reflected in the textbooks he examined, communication is speaking, whereas scholars regard communication as involving any mode of language use and any symbolic system. In the same vein, Thompson (1996) suggests that misconceptions about the tenets of CLT have been found among practicing teachers. They are, for instance, 1) CLT means not teaching grammar; and 2) CLT means teaching only speaking.

Clearly, CLT is interpreted differently in different contexts, which makes the study of contexts especially important in looking at the application and effectiveness of this approach. Therefore, it is important to discuss this concept within the Thai context for the purpose of this study.

### **Critiques of CLT**

Much as CLT has been touted as an approach that brings “real” communication into language classrooms, concerns have been raised by certain researchers and practitioners about its contributions, particularly in foreign language (FL), or English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. Such concerns range from classroom activities that CLT advocates, such as role-play, group/pair work, etc., to its ideological underpinnings. For instance, Rao’s (2002) study on Chinese university students’ attitudes towards communicative and non-communicative activities in the classroom revealed that the students “...liked non-communicative activities more than communicative ones” (p. 91). This is because the students believed that such traditional activities as audiolingual and workbook type drills and practices were still important. Such findings reinforced the idea that a

combination of both CLT and traditional methods is best. Based on these findings, Rao suggests that, "...only by reconciling communicative activities with non-communicative activities in English classrooms can students in non-English speaking countries benefit from CLT" (p. 85).

By the same token, Pica (2000) argues that since CLT focuses almost entirely on the meaning of messages gleaned from comprehensible L2 input and secondarily on the structures, CLT does not sufficiently prepare the learners for eventual success in L2 acquisition/learning. Learners are deprived of opportunities to notice "how L2 sounds and structures relate to the meanings of messages they encode..." (p. 6). Also, as far as corrective feedback is concerned, Pica believes that "communication alone appears to be insufficient, perhaps even detrimental, to the learner in the long run..." (p. 6). This is so because, as Williams (1997), cited in Pica (2000), claims, learners, especially advanced learners, "... rarely receive feedback on their lexical and morphosyntactic imprecisions, as long as they communicate their message meaning... . As a result, many of their imprecisions go unnoticed, and there is no need for these learners to modify their production toward greater grammaticality, nor to incorporate new grammatical features toward their language development" (p. 6). For Pica, the learners must be led to attend to the form of input as well as its meaning. They must produce the L2, and be given feedback in order to modify their production toward greater comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy.

Similarly, Swan (1985) argues that the main emphasis of CLT on meaning and language use is misguided in the sense it treats EFL learners as if they did not know how to negotiate meaning even in their own language. He says, "language learners already know how to negotiate meaning. They have been doing it all their lives. What they do not know is what words are used to do it in a foreign language. They need lexical items, not skills..." (p. 9). He attacks CLT's "tabula rasa' attitude—the belief that students do not possess, or cannot transfer from their mother tongue, normal communication skills—as a fallacy" (p. 10). Swan concludes his position by stating that, "[t]he Communicative Approach, whatever its virtues, is not really in any sense a

revolution. In retrospect, it is likely to be seen as little more than an interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century language teaching” (p. 87).

Ellis (1996) questions the validity and relevance of CLT’s tenets—particularly the Canale and Swain model, which I described above—in an EFL setting, such as Vietnam. His main argument is that the CLT approach does not respond well to Asian educational conditions, particularly in Vietnam. Because of its Western value bias, such as “individualism” (as opposed to “collectivism” in Vietnam), CLT is inappropriate. The “process-orientation” of Western pedagogy that emphasizes communicative competence conflicts with the “product-orientation” of Vietnamese pedagogy that stresses rote memorization and teachers’ “words,” regarded as “final and expert” ideas to comply with. Therefore, he calls for the current CLT approach to be mediated by local teachers in order to make it appropriate to the local cultural norms and to redefine the student-teacher relationship in keeping with the cultural norms embedded in the method itself.

Studies that deal with the effectiveness of CLT in other EFL countries have been reported. For example, Burnaby and Sun (1989) elicited the views of 24 experienced Chinese EFL teachers on the appropriateness and effectiveness of CLT. Findings reported are that these teachers believe that CLT, with its main emphasis on “communicating” message meaning and, secondarily, on grammatical accuracy, is useful for students who plan to study in English-speaking countries. In China, however, there is no real need to speak English in daily life. Moreover, these teachers contend that their current teaching methods, that are based mainly on grammatical accuracy, work better than CLT because most of their students will do work in China which involves such tasks as reading technical articles and translating documents.

Li’s (1998) case study about teachers’ perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea indicates, in the main, that CLT seems not to be well received in South Korea because of the differences between the underlying educational theories of South Korea and those of Western countries. For instance, there are four major constraints that render it difficult to implement CLT in South Korea: 1) large

classes; 2) grammar-based examinations; 3) insufficient funding; and 4) lack of professional, administrative, and collegial support. These, coupled with another major argument that these teachers raised—that “CLT has not given an adequate account of EFL teaching despite its initial growth in foreign language teaching in Europe” (p. 694)—make CLT “unpopular” among this group of teachers. Based on the findings, Li suggests that EFL countries should stop relying almost exclusively on “expert” opinions from the outside and “...strive to establish their own research contingents and encourage methods that take into account the political, economic, social, and cultural factors, and most important of all, the EFL situations in their countries” (p. 698). The call for local wisdom such as this cautions EFL professionals against blindly adopting Western conceived teaching methodologies, CLT being a case in point.

In summary, the critiques leveled against the Western-conceived model of CLT, implemented in Asian settings, such as the Canale and Swain model discussed above, share the concern that the EFL environment where those teachers work deserves a language teaching model that addresses how language could be taught both communicatively and effectively in their local cultural and educational circumstances. In other words, the imposition of the Western CLT model on their EFL teaching environments will meet with lukewarm attitudes at best or resistance and rejection at worst. One universally accepted definition or model of CLT does not work. Rather, a working definition of CLT will need to be construed context by context.

In the following section, I will discuss salient features of the Thai context for language learning. The discussion will revolve around Thai culture, educational tradition, and the role of teachers in general.

### **The Thai context for language learning**

Buddhism pervades Thai life and thought (Matzen, 1996). It has shaped the present Thai educational system with the ultimate educational goal of cooperation to preserve a natural, hierarchical, and social order (Casebeer and Miller, 1991). One

implication is that Thais avoid confrontation, particularly with persons of higher status. Thai students are conditioned not to question teachers' authority. In this respect, Thai teachers have traditionally been considered unquestioned givers of knowledge whereas students are regarded as inexperienced and thus not in a position to express or share ideas. Simpson's (1997) research study on metapragmatic discourse in Thai confirms that the practice of respecting status and hierarchy is still ubiquitous. She asserts, "in spite of ...pervasive social changes [in Thailand, brought about by modernization and rapid economic development], social relationships among Thais are still characterized by a distinct awareness of and attention to the protocols associated with rank and status, and corresponding respect for the rights and obligations implicit in the hierarchy" (p. 41).

The notion of paying due deference to authority is reflected in another branch of Thai culture regarding textbooks. That is, Thais are used to the practice of accepting what is written in textbooks as something not to be challenged. When Thai parents tell their children to do serious studying, they often tell them to *Tong Nung-Seu* (literally meaning to memorize the content of what is written in a textbook), whereas Americans, as I understand it, believe that ideas presented in a given book belong to its author and should be evaluated critically.

Concerning the importance that Thais assign to status and hierarchy, Matzen (1996), citing Fieg (1989), points out that "...on the one hand, we have to contend with the Freirean notion that hierarchical power structures are immoral and not democratic, but on the other hand, we have the Thai view that hierarchical, social structures are natural, positive occurrences that give social mobility meaning" (p. 9). While it is true that respect and due deference to one's teachers are called for in most cultures, Thai people, in general, tend to manifest a higher degree of such practice than can be found in most Western cultures, and especially in American educational culture.

As for Thai students' classroom interaction patterns, Scovel (1994), by comparing Thai students with Japanese/Chinese and American counterparts, claims that Thai students can be classed

as belonging to a “semi-confucian” (p. 214) category. That is, they have a strong tendency to take the middle ground between accuracy and fluency, taking risks and being safe, deductive and inductive reasoning, emphasis on product and on process, cooperation and competition and so on. These learning styles of Thai students relate to those of both Japanese/Chinese and Americans. For example, the Japanese and Chinese are perceived by Scovel as hierarchical, deductive, cooperative, and group-centered and the Americans as non-hierarchical, competitive, individual-centered, and extroverted.

In short, salient Thai cultural aspects such as the importance given to hierarchy and status and politeness, as discussed above, have direct bearing on how Thai teachers are treated by students. Scovel’s assertion about the learning styles and personal characteristics of Thai students as “semi-confucian” fairly reflects what average Thai students are like in a typical classroom. For example, the idea that Thai students will be inclined “to take risks when safe” in classroom interactions suggests that the teacher will need to give a “go-ahead” to Thai students when he/she would like any of them to express opinions.

Given the typical classroom behavior of Thai students and the role of Thai teachers as authority figures mentioned above, I will in the next section discuss English language teaching in Thailand briefly, so as to provide relevant information concerning teaching methods that have been used by most teachers.

### **English language teaching in Thailand**

Masavisut et al.’s (1986) claim that “English is being used as a powerful tool to bring the world to Thailand and Thailand to the world” reflects that in Thailand learning English is now a matter of necessity. This is because, according to Raksaphet (1991), knowledge in almost every field is available in English, many well-paid jobs in both public and private sectors in Thailand look for recruits who have a reasonably good command of English, and English has become a powerful tool for carrying out international business and strengthening the economy. He states that, “English has lost its ‘foreignness’ in Thailand” (p. 66). Wongsothorn et al. (1996) report that about 99% of Thai students



begin studying English at the elementary level of education. English is also a required subject in annual national entrance examinations. It is ironic that while English has lost its foreignness in Thailand as Raksaphet claims, its status in the country is still that of a foreign language. In fact, it has no official status in the country.

Since English is taught as a foreign language, the majority of those who teach it in all levels of education are Thai teachers. Most of them have received degrees in English, linguistics, or teaching English. Traditionally, a typical English classroom in Thailand is conducted by the teacher using the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods. I still can recall my experience as a student in one of the oldest public schools in Bangkok where all the English classes I attended were taught by Thai teachers of English, who emphasized in all lessons grammar and vocabulary; no time was set aside for speaking activities. This was because we students had no need to speak English outside of school, but we did have to take a grammar-based annual university entrance examination. While I do not necessarily find the traditional teaching methods ineffective, I realized later as a college student that I did not have any exposure to 'real' English until as a senior majoring in teaching English and French as foreign languages, when I took a speaking course taught by a native-speaking teacher. My experience here can serve as an example of the typical EFL teaching and learning in most Thai schools, particularly before the Thai EFL community was open to CLT methods in the 80s.

A British Council expert in teacher education in Thailand, Mountford (1986), cited in Wasanasomsithi (1998), points out some serious problems that hinder success of English language teaching in Thailand. They include lack of proper curricula, dry teaching styles that are overly concerned with grammatical details, inappropriate texts that are not related to learners' real interests, and a scarce opportunity for students to interact with one another in class (p. 20). According to Wongsothorn et al. (1996), the provision of foreign language education in Thailand is insufficient.

Probably this insufficiency is reflected in Doughty's<sup>1</sup> (1998) comparison of the number of hours that Thai students spend learning English over ten years and the number of hours someone spends learning their first language in three years. As a result, Thai EFL teachers at all levels are faced with a very difficult task of trying to support students' acquisition of English.

### **Current teaching method(s) adopted by Thai EFL teachers**

*"The communicative approach **with an eclectic orientation** (emphasis mine) is favored at the various levels of education. Grammar and vocabulary learning are integrated into the teaching, materials development, and assessment"*

*--Wongsothorn et al., (1996, p. 100).*

This assertion by Wongsothorn et al. finds support in a claim made by Wasanasomsithi (1998) that Thai EFL teachers at the university level in her study employed a variety of teaching methods rather than using one teaching method exclusively, and that those teachers are in favor of the ultimate goal of developing students' communicative competence. The claim about teachers using the communicative approach with an eclectic orientation indicates to me that Thai EFL teachers, like most teachers in other EFL contexts, are at least cognizant of CLT and that some have implemented it in their classrooms. However, I also realize that, more often than not, what teachers say they do in class may not necessarily match what they actually do; or they may distort or modify the original concept as they see fit in their socio-cultural contexts. For example, Sullivan (1996) reports the view of Vietnamese teachers that, "We're learning a lot, but we have to make it *our own Vietnamese style of communicative method* (emphasis mine). We have to fit our culture into your methodology" (p. 4). As in Vietnam, Thai EFL teachers may have

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<sup>1</sup> Doughty (1998) suggests that "... the grand total of hours [a typical EFL student spends studying English] over the course of ten years is 1,800," whereas children learning their first language usually receive the language input for nearly 8,000 hours during their first three years—"about four and a half times more exposure than the most dedicated classroom language learners receive over ten years" (p. 135).

been practicing the tenets of CLT in their own classrooms with some modification to better suit their contexts.

### **Research trends in SLA and classroom practices vis-à-vis English in the Thai classroom**

Because SLA focuses primarily on diverse processes that learners go through in acquiring/learning an L2 and because of the emergent notion of World Englishes, trends in research and instruction vis-à-vis the teaching of English in Thailand are the following.

In the first place, the traditional notion of communicative competence as suggested by Canale and Swain (1980) needs to be broadened in scope. This provides yet another exciting area of research regarding English as an international language (EIL). Alptekin (2002) suggests the replacement of the term communicative competence with the term “intercultural communicative competence (ICC).” Some of the justifications he gives are ICC would make the goal of learning English throughout the world more realistic, less utopian, and less ethnocentric. More specifically, through EIL and ICC, L2 learners are not going to be perceived as “foreign” learners who try (unsuccessfully) to master English or any other L2. Rather, they are going to have equal access to the claim of English as one of their own languages, an additional language they can rightly be proud of. In this sense, Thai SLA researchers and teachers should look into any possibility of applying the EIL and ICC notions in their respective classrooms. For example, they may use local literature written or translated into English in their English classes. So far as research agendas are concerned, Thai SLA researchers might want to conduct studies concerning the status of the Thai variety of English to shed more light on this sub-area of SLA.

Second, in terms of teaching approaches, Thai teachers of English might consider planned eclectic approaches to teaching, or a context approach (Bax, 2003), rather than adhere to any particular teaching methods. Some of the obvious reasons are that no single factor can readily account for how Thai students succeed

or fail in their English learning, and that teaching effectiveness must be construed context by context.

Third, in terms of foreign language policy, the government should make it a top priority to provide both short-term and long-term training for Thai teachers of English. The nature of the training should run the gamut of theoretical knowledge (e.g. the accessibility hierarchy, interlanguage pragmatics, the teachability hypothesis, accommodation, and acculturation theories) to day-to-day classroom techniques (e.g. learning strategies, communication strategies, etc). Certainly, continuous training programs that focus on the teacher's own linguistic knowledge must be provided; teachers must possess both declarative and procedural knowledge.

Fourth, although anathema to most people, grammar must be taught to learners (Fotos, 2002). The kind of grammar that is of concern to this author is "pedagogical or discourse grammar," where form, meaning, and use are appropriately combined as DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman suggest (2002, pp. 19-34). It is tritely axiomatic that success in language acquisition can be gauged by both accuracy and fluency in the language—be it first or second.

Moreover, given the fact that most Thai learners of English may not have ample opportunity to use English on a daily basis, the teacher should not expect them to be very fluent and thus willing to perform in English effectively in a short duration of time. In class, the teacher should be allowed to use Thai when teaching grammar. In fact, Cook (2001) suggests that using the first language in the classroom should be supported rather than suppressed. As he puts it, "treating the L1 as a classroom resource opens up several ways to use it, such as for teachers to convey meaning, explain grammar, and organize the class, and for students to use as part of their collaborative learning and individual strategy use" (p.402).

In summary, those concerned with English language instruction in Thailand must necessarily be open-minded. They are not supposed to go to extremes in deciding such activities and practices as lesson planning, organizing classroom activities, the use of English as a medium of instruction and the like. Indeed, as

Lightbown (2000) points out, researchers and teachers need not become either “standpat traditionalists,” who resist any new ideas, or “impressionable adventurers,” who blindly believe that any new trend is always better. If Thai teachers of English maintain a well-balanced perspective on SLA and if they keep abreast of developments in the field, they will hope to find satisfactory answers to the enigma as to how and why few Thai people succeed and many fail in “getting” English.

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