

Reflection and Projection on Thailand's Language Education Policy for the New Millennium

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This paper is in five parts:

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Part I: Preamble

The Eighth National Education Development Plans: 1997-2001 (p. 40) comments on the insufficient time for foreign language curriculum. The need for more language learning especially English has become more apparent as Thailand is stepping into the information super highway, forming and pushing towards the ever-encroaching future. The foreign language curriculum may be classified into three main categories: language and skills for communication, literature for arts and humanistic values, and linguistics for the scientific study of language. Foreign language education is in three streams: liberal education, humanistic education, and career or utilitarian education. The need for more language learning is part and parcel of national development. Stressing the significance of information technology in the

last two decades, Ketudat (1996:1-2) states that... "the effects (of telecommunications and computer technology) upon human civilization are far beyond imagination." The might of "information technology" not only enables human beings to be in contact with one another more speedily and conveniently, but also propels the emergence of a new "borderless" world. ...it is a world that seeks a new balance between "global" and "local" values, thoughts and ways of life amidst existing cultural diversity. Truly, the era of globalization has arrived with many implications for national stability. Only countries endowed with vision and wisdom to understand the globalization process and its oncoming threats and opportunities will be able to secure a peaceful and productive co-existence in the international community.

In teaching languages, the choice of one or more languages, the mother tongue or a foreign language is determined by the educational and cultural policy of the country. Standard Thai, the country's only official language, is the language of instruction at all levels of education. As recommended by the 43rd International Conference on Education held in Geneva between 14-19 September 1992 (pp. 20-21), out-of-school cultural and educational activities are desirable to uphold the rights of individuals and the various ethnic groups to preserve their cultural identity expressed through language which is a very important vehicle to the preservation and development of minority languages. The Conference also encouraged research in educational science, linguistics, anthropology and history, and the preparation of the teaching materials in the mother tongue. This recommendation has struck a balance between "global" and "local" cultural and educational values.

As the number of regional and international organizations grows, the greater is the demand for English use. As witnessed by the use of English as the medium of communication of these organizations such as ASEAN University Network (AUN), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), English has been accepted as the language for international communication in Thailand.

The implication is that Thailand's neighboring countries should acquire the use of English in order to qualify for entry into these organizations.

Part 2: The Language Education Policy at Elementary and Secondary Levels

To fulfil the social and national demand for language education, on 19 December 1995, the Cabinet approved the language education policy proposed by the Ministry of Education. The policy states that:

1. The government will support the teaching and learning of foreign languages widely and effectively.
2. Students will start learning English as a foreign language from Grade 1 onwards using the curriculum, syllabus and guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education.
3. Students will be encouraged to learn other foreign languages in the following ways:
 - 3.1 At primary and lower secondary levels of education, one other foreign language can be taken as specified by the Ministry of Education.
 - 3.2 At upper secondary level of education, students can freely choose to study other foreign languages.
4. The Ministry of Education will be responsible for developing foreign language curricula for the levels lower than higher education while local and regional bodies will partake in adjusting the curricula to best suit the socio-economic contexts of each area concerned. The Ministry of Education will develop plans for accelerating development of quality of foreign language education at all levels. Continuous evaluation to obtain

feedback for curriculum improvement and implementation is necessary.

5. All parties concerned, both private and governmental, will join hands in promoting foreign language education.
6. Any educational institutions interested in offering foreign language programs which are not in accordance with the Ministry's guidelines can ask for permission from the Ministry.

Source: Ministry of Education. 1996. The Ministry of Education's Foreign Language Education Policy. Bangkok: Planning Division, the Ministry of Education.

Enhancement of the Foreign Language Education Policy

On 9 May 1978 the Cabinet passed the resolution for foreign language education which states that:

At the primary level, private schools ready to teach foreign language classes are allowed to start English in grades 1 to 4, for not more than 5 hours per week. In grades 5 to 6, 5 more hours are added.

At the lower secondary level, all foreign languages are regarded as equally important and students can study one foreign language as an elective subject. At the upper secondary level, students can study 2 foreign languages as an elective subject. (Ministry of The Ministry of Education's Foreign Language Education Policy, (1996).

In actuality, 90 percent of private schools offered English in Grade 5 upwards while public schools either started English in grade 3 or grade 5 as their readiness permits. Primary English was conducted in accordance with the Ministry of Education's 1990-revised curriculum, which stipulated English as a special experience subject offered 5 hours per week. At secondary level of education, over 90 percent of students choose English as an elective.

The Ministry of Education has realized that currently English and other foreign language education offered is merely to serve individual's needs and interests and that the learning of foreign languages has not been considered a foundation or basic subject for all Thais. This has had impact on the country's economic development and academic/professional requirements. The Ministry feels that the need for Thais to communicate with other peoples should be urgently fulfilled. Foreign language education will facilitate telecommunications and global information transfer. Thus, the Ministry proposed the foreign language education policy which was passed by the Cabinet on 19 December 1995 stipulating that English is a compulsory subject starting from Grade 1, that primary and lower secondary students can choose one more foreign language, and that upper secondary students can freely choose to study foreign languages. The Policy also gives the status of English as the first foreign language starting in primary schools while other foreign languages can be added to the curriculum, one language at the lower secondary level and more at the upper secondary level (The 1996 English Language

Curriculum). The Ministry will promote curriculum developments to best fit local and regional demands.

Curriculum Revision

The following activities are necessary for curriculum revision. They are: Improvements of English curriculum from Grade 1 to Mathayom Suksa 6 (Grade 12) making it an integrated and continuous entity emphasizing communication and multiple standards of achievement.

Grades 1&2: Preparatory curriculum stressing learning readiness, listening and speaking skills, fun in learning for personal and daily uses to create good attitudes.

Grades 3&4: Literacy program of learning emphasizing reading and writing.

Grades 5&6: Beginners' English emphasizing listening, speaking, reading and writing with correct basic grammar.

Grades 7-9: The syllabus at this level is aimed at language communication, which is grammatically correct and culturally appropriate. More courses are provided for students with good language aptitude.

Grades 10-12: The syllabus is geared towards developing students' capacity of using language for communication correctly as well as creative use of language according to cultures of the native speakers. A condensed program is provided for students with good language aptitude.

Teaching and Learning Procedures

The goal is to create communicative proficiency required for social, personal, academic purposes. Classroom interactions using integrative skills are emphasized. Language materials are varied and conducive

for language developments. Various media, authentic materials, audio-visuals, newspapers, pictures, etc. are to be utilized together with video, CAI, distance learning, language labs, etc. These aids are to be selected to best fit each situation and learning needs to give maximum benefit to the students.

Measurement and Evaluation

Communicative proficiency in language used is to be assessed aiming to create students' learning progress. The four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing are to be assessed using various test types. Portfolios, records and observations are to be utilized for continuous developments.

Part 3: Language Education Policy at Higher Education Level

Thai and English are the required subject for entry into higher education. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of University Affairs to screen secondary students for admission to higher education. Thai and English are also part of general education in the first year. At this level English is a foundation subject. After that most students continue learning English for academic purposes and specific/professional purposes in second, third and fourth years. At present both Thai public and private universities offer 356 international programs at undergraduate and graduate levels using English as the medium of instruction. There are 122 undergraduate programs in 70 areas of study in 24 universities; 176 master's degree programs in 112 areas of study in 21 universities and 58 doctoral degree programs in 32 areas of study in 12 universities. This

reflects the popularity and importance of English as the medium of instruction at this level of education (International Programs in Thai Higher Education Institutions, p.2).

Thai students competing for admission to higher education institutions have to take Thai and English university entrance examinations. Besides these two languages, they can choose to take one additional foreign language: Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin, Pali, German or French.

The Policy Framework

Thailand's Higher Education Development Plan is formulated and integrated into the Five-Year National Economic and Social Development Plan, interfacing educational activities to the economic, social and cultural goals of national development. The Ministry of University Affairs has taken the initiatives to formulate Thailand's first Long-range Plan for Higher Education Development (1990-2004) with more proactive and dynamic approach in responding to changing environments. The Long-range Plan emphasizes five major dimensions of higher education development namely (1) equity, (2) efficiency, (3) excellence, (4) internationalization, and (5) privatization. In terms of international programs at higher education level, close collaboration with many leading institutions around the world from Australia and Japan to Canada, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom has been implemented. Through English as the medium of instruction, Thailand's international programs have attracted not only Thai students but also students from neighboring countries and other regions

(International Programs in Thai Higher Education Institutions, 1999).

In April 1997, the Ministry of University Affairs passed the policy framework and measures for language learning in higher education for 1996-2006. The objectives for language learning in higher education are to:

1. develop student capacity of using Thai correctly and appropriately
2. develop student capacity of using at least one foreign language for academic and communicative purposes
3. develop knowledge and understanding of Thai and foreign languages and cultures as well as the capacity of using Thai and a foreign language at an advanced level.

The Goals of Language Education in Higher Education (1996-2005)

1. Undergraduate students have the capacity of effective use of the Thai Language
2. Undergraduate students have the capacity of communicating in English
3. Undergraduate students are provided with the opportunity to learn a second foreign language for communicative purposes
4. Universities/Institutes will admit undergraduate students majoring-minoring in a foreign language according to its importance and goals as follows:
 - 4.1 English: continuous increase in the number of enrollment relative to the capacity of each institution concerned, aiming at doubling the current number of students in 10 years' time.

- 4.2 Languages of the neighboring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Malaysia: expanding the admission for each language to 100 students per language in 10 years' time.
- 4.3 Chinese, Korean, Japanese and other oriental languages: increase in the number of admissions relative to capacity and need.
- 4.4 Western languages such as German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian and other western languages: increase in the number of admissions relative to capacity and need.
- 4.5 Other languages: adjust the number of admissions relative to capacity and academic need of the universities/institutes concerned.
5. Every university/institute has full-time language teacher-student ratio of 1:12.
6. Every university/institute has teachers with doctoral, master, and bachelor degrees at the ratio of 3.5:6.0:0.5
7. Universities/Institutes create linkages (consortia) to develop academic capacity and maximum use of limited resources.
8. Every university creates self-access language learning centers for self-improvement in language uses through high technology for communication.

Development Issues, Policy and Implementation Framework

To implement the policy the following framework has been developed by the Ministry of University Affairs for managing language teaching and learning.

The table below outlines the policy and its corresponding implementation plan.

Remarks: The Eastern languages here are all "living" modern languages. Pali and Sanskrit, the major classical languages of Asia, are not included since the objectives of teaching and learning of these two languages differ from the rest.

Development Issues	Policy and Implementation Framework
<p data-bbox="263 297 628 376">I. Management of Language Learning</p> <p data-bbox="288 439 482 472">Thai Language</p> <p data-bbox="263 1227 498 1261">English Language</p>	<ol data-bbox="793 439 1299 1951" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="793 439 1299 696">1. Promote continuous and systematic development of skills in using Thai while at university to achieve the highest possible standard of using correct Thai to be a model for language use in the society.<li data-bbox="793 712 1299 1070">2. Develop graduate studies of the Thai language in high capacity institutions in congruence with changes in technology and needs. Promote research and developments in language instruction of Thai as the mother tongue and for Thai as a second/ foreign language.<li data-bbox="793 1086 1299 1164">3. Allocate funds for students selected into the Thai language program. <ol data-bbox="793 1227 1299 1951" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="793 1227 1299 1350">1. Encourage every student to study English and to be able to effectively communicate in English.<li data-bbox="793 1366 1299 1624">2. Revise the English curriculum at undergraduate level in order to enable students to search for knowledge in their various fields of study and to pursue their career both locally and globally.<li data-bbox="793 1639 1299 1951">3. Develop graduate studies in universities and institutions capable of offering English teacher training programs in order to produce more English language teachers, research studies and development of English language learning.

<p>Languages of the Neighboring Countries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Vietnamese -Burmese -Khmer -Lao -Malay 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote degree-level study of languages of neighboring countries in universities and institutions with the capacity to offer such programs, including staff development and training of the public in general to serve specific language needs. 2. Allocate funds for students selected into neighboring country language programs, especially for students coming from the areas in which these languages are commonly used. 3. Allocate budget for universities/institutions offering neighboring country language programs at degree level in accordance with the number of full-time students congruent with actual demand. 4. Promote student exchange programs with neighboring countries.
<p>Eastern Languages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Chinese -Korean -Japanese 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encourage universities /institutions with the necessary resources, to increase the number of students in these language programs to serve the needs of the workplace. 2. Promote graduate studies in these languages to serve the need and demand for teachers and research studies in eastern language learning.
<p>Western Languages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -German -French -Spanish -Italian -Russian 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encourage universities/institutions with the necessary resources to increase the number of students in these language programs to serve needs of the workplace. 2. Promote graduate studies in these Languages to serve the need and demand for teachers and

<p>Other Languages -Arabic -Hindi etc.</p>	<p>research studies in western language learning.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote instruction in other languages such as Hindi, Arabic, Sanskrit in line with readiness and interest of universities/ institutions.
<p>Translation and Simultaneous Interpretation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote training and development in advanced translation and simultaneous interpretation.
<p>II. Teacher Development</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support scholarships and funds for both practicing teachers and the general public to pursue their graduate studies here and abroad at master's and doctoral levels in line with national language policy and workload. 2. Allocate funds for long-term training abroad in the fields where master's or doctoral programs are not offered, especially training in the languages of neighboring countries. 3. Allocate funds for short-term training and participation in academic seminars and conferences abroad in order to gain more skills, knowledge and the ability to keep abreast of academic and technological innovations. Require the grantees to present explicit plans for the development of language learning upon their return to Thailand after training. 4. Promote research in curriculum Development, teaching and learning techniques, area studies, textbook and material

<p>III. Technology-Assisted Learning</p>	<p>development, and technology assisted learning. Management and administration of these programs will be conducted through consortia for special mutual institutional benefits.</p> <p>5. Encourage universities/ institutions with the necessary resources to offer training in language learning to disseminate techniques, knowledge and language skills to teachers and staff from other universities /institutions.</p> <p>1. Support universities/institutions in their improvement of equipment and technology to assist language learning in order to keep abreast of innovations and institutional language learning policy.</p> <p>2. Promote linkages among universities/ institutions in developing new technology for mutual benefit.</p> <p>3. Encourage self-access language learning centers to promote student language capacity through innovative communication technology.</p> <p>4. Promote linkages among Institutions here and abroad to create network for development and use of modern technology in language learning.</p>
<p>IV. Foreign Experts</p>	<p>1. Promote cooperation networking between Thai and foreign universities/institutions by exchange programs of language teachers for</p>

	<p>instruction, research, curriculum development and the use of new technologies.</p> <p>2. Support the hiring of native-speaker teachers to fulfil the demand by improving salary rate, other benefits and welfare.</p>
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Source: Policy Framework and Measures for Development of Language Education at University Level. Policy and Planning Division, the Ministry of University Affairs. (25th April 1997).

The policy framework presents the holistic approach to developing language education programs in higher education by combining instructional management, teacher development, use of high technology and expert assistance into one operational framework. Higher institutions should integrate efforts from various areas in carrying out realistic and practical activities.

Part 4: Conclusion

Educational policies of Thailand are determined by the Cabinet under the supervision of the Office of the National Education Commission, but short-term policies for particular issues can be determined by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of University Affairs, and the Ministry of Interior (Wongsothorn et al., 1996). Therefore, the same issue might be handled differently in different ministries. In any case, short-term policies must not be contrary to the long-term policies which are

declared officially in the constitution under the heading of “directive principles and state policies”, or in the government policies given to the National Assembly or in a particular national education plan.

Part 5: Recommendation

In developing a language policy it is obvious that social demand is of prime importance, as is the case of Thailand. Despite various technical drawbacks and a lack of readiness within the sectors and parties concerned, optimistic and constructive outlooks on the possibilities of social progress made possible by language education should be upheld. Social, cultural and personal contexts within which human activities are carried out are guidelines for language education. Understanding and dialogical interactions through language can overcome conflicts of interest and polarizations in perceptions. Peace reigns.

The Author

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