# Whole Language and Its Application to EFL classroom in Thailand

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## Abstract

Whole language recently has become an impressive tool for our educational community. It offers a way to teach language from whole to part. It is suggested that children should read 'whole' books and write 'whole' stories, letters, and other real-life writings, for example. Reading, specifically, should be taught as a means of creating meaning from prints. It is taught in the meaningful context of real reading and writing activities. In other words, meaningfulness is the key word for classroom instruction.

In the context of Thailand, whole language also offers lots of suggestions. Incorporating whole language in an EFL reading classroom in Thailand will encourage students to explore on authentic materials rather than practicing and drilling on worksheets, or reading a created paragraph for a specific sub-skill. In conclusion, the natural environment of acquiring language, the meaningful contexts, the communicative purpose, the authentic materials, and faith in the ability of students cause students to learn and acquire the target language effectively.

Over the last decade, whole language has become quite popular in language instruction. It is, as a matter of fact, not ". . . a method, nor a collection of strategies, techniques, or materials although certain approaches and materials are characteristic of whole language classes" (Rigg, 1991: 523). That is, it is a set of beliefs, a perspective on language and language acquisition (Altwerger, 1989; Freeman & Freeman, 1991a; Newman, 1985). Specifically, Kenneth Goodman (1986) defined whole language as "a way of bringing together a view of language, a view of learning, a view of people, in particular two special groups of people: kids and teachers" (p. 5).

There has been a wide range of interpretations concerning whole language; therefore, it may be helpful to focus on the philosophy of whole language. The core of whole language is its focus on *whole-to-part* learning. In other words, teachers are encouraged to teach the target language as a

whole, not to break it into small components. Whole language seems to be the prime way to bring the real use of real language into the classroom. It is through language that one communicates with the other his/her feelings; s/he provides and receives information, asks questions, responds to other people, forms friendships, works out problems, and thinks both critically and creatively. The principles of whole language are based on these facts of actual communication. As a result, whole language brings to classrooms meaningful communication as what usually happens outside classrooms.

## Principles and Strategies of Whole Language

Although there is a variety of interpretation about whole language, its aspects, structure, and content, there are certain commonly accepted principles that constitute whole language and that are supported by research (Altweger, 1989; Cornett & Blankenship, 1990; Freeman & Freeman, 1991a; 1991b; 1992; Rigg, 1991; Newman, 1985). Its principles include:

- Natural environment
- "Whole" language
- The creation and communication of meaning
- Active learners
- "Real" language use
- "Relaxing and caring environment
- Trust and faith

*Natural Environment.* Outside classroom, one usually learns to listen, speak, read, and write according to his/her needs and interests. It is natural that one will do, watch, and discuss about what s/he likes. It is also natural that we may use language to do unenjoyable things, such as arguing, looking for a job, and getting directions when we are lost. This is the same as when we learn language, i.e.,

learners would enjoy using the target language in the classroom in a manner and form close to the requirement of language use in the outside world. The connection between the classroom and the real-life settings is crucial for whole language framework.

*"Whole" Language.* Meaningfulness is essential for this aspect. Whole language derives its name from this principle and proposes that children should read "whole" books and write "whole" stories, letters, and other "real life" writings. Therefore, whole language teachers generally avoid the direct teaching of skills as the prerequisite for reading and writing. However, it should be noted that decontextualization, or skill teaching, is still taught to some extent later on. In conclusion, reading is not taught according to phonics, whole word, linguistic, or eclectic approaches but is taught as a means of creating meaning from print. It is taught in the meaningful context of real reading and writing activities. For example, jigsaw reading is quite a basic technique for teachers to use so that they can encourage students to focus their attention on the meaning of the reading. A teacher may assign students to read certain paragraphs/ sections; different students or groups of students read different paragraphs without any knowledge about other paragraphs. Then, the teacher asks them to reorder the paragraphs to make a complete passage or story by telling others about what they have read. After that, a writing assignment on the same theme or topic may be assigned as a follow-up activity. For instance, if the students read about smoking in public, the teacher can ask them to write an argument based on their opinions.

*The Creation and Communication of Meaning.* The major purpose of whole language classes is to acquire meaning since

students can learn things better when they see those as having meaning and they can connect to their personal lives or needs (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). In addition, language is naturally used as a means of giving and getting meaning. Whole language children learn to realize this point and to use language purposefully.

*Active Learners.* When students are active participants in their own learning process, they are more mentally and physically involved. Whole language emphasizes the student as an active language user. Students do not just listen to their teachers and answer questions, but they also ask questions, write stories and publish them. In whole language classrooms, it is important to have a goal orientation to children's thoughts and movements.

*"Real" Language Use.* It is also essential in the whole language perspective that every activity designed for practicing uses of language be real. Students should not be involved in classroom activities just for the purpose of practicing specific skills. Although this is useful to a certain extent, it should not be taught as the end in itself. Rather, the students should read and write for themselves and others. The audience needs to be real, according to whole language. Therefore, activities like penpal letters, journal writing, free reading, etc., are often found in whole language classrooms.

*Relaxing and Caring Environment.*
Students learn most when they are comfortable with taking risk and making mistakes. They need to be informed that it is all right to ask questions, express opinions, and make errors. In other words, students learn, rather than suffer, from failure. The learning environment in whole language classrooms makes students feel secure and enjoy learning.

*Trust and Faith.* "Whole language teachers believe that the language learning potential is there in each child, just waiting to be released" (Cornett & Blankenship, 1990: 26). It is true that teacher's beliefs have a strong influence on students' performance. Whole language advocates the need to value this principle.

## Present Situation of English Education in Thailand

According to the Eighth National Education Development Plans: 1997-2001 (National Education Commission, 1996), English is compulsory from grade 1 onwards, without interruption throughout primary and secondary education. Its goals are as follows:

1. Students will be able to communicate in various situations accurately and appropriately.
2. Students will be able to continuously develop their English ability for educational or occupational purposes.
3. Students will be able to listen, speak, read, and write for communication purposes for their acquisition of knowledge in all aspects.
4. Students will primarily gain knowledge and understanding of ways of life and culture of those who use English as the mother tongue and of the world community and in the end they will be able to creatively transfer Thais' ways to others.
5. Students will have good attitudes toward English realizing its values and usefulness for their learning and occupations.

Consequently, English has been emphasized both extensively and intensively. That is, students learn not only language skills for communication, but also its cultural values while being exposed to the linguistic aspects. Examining the Eight National Education Development Plan more closely, one can see that the Ministry of Education acknowledges the

significance of functions of the language: greeting, expressing opinions, giving and asking for directions, etc. Instructional methods, then, tend to follow the communicative approach; pair work, role play, and the like are encouraged. English, as a result, plays a major role in Thailand's educational policies as it is perceived to be a useful tool for both academic and occupational purposes.

However, there has been criticism about the curriculum whether it has overemphasized the notion of communicative approach. Since Thai students are still required to take the entrance examination to enter a public university, they need to possess a certain amount of English usage. For graduate schools, the students also have to take TOEFL, for example, which requires trivial grammatical knowledge and specific low-frequency vocabulary. Both the entrance examination and TOEFL consist of multiple choice questions, testing many aspects and subskills of English language. As a result, if the students have fun at school, using role plays, they tend to seek help from private tutors for English grammar-based instruction. That is why many English teachers still apply mostly skills-based instruction in their classrooms, no matter on what the curriculum focuses.

## Whole Language in Thailand

Principles and strategies in whole language offer English language teachers in Thailand a lot of suggestions. First of all, whole language instruction builds upon students' existing knowledge and emerging understandings of literacy. Skills-based instruction too often ignores what students already know about language when they step through the classroom door. On the contrary, whole language values this issue and encourages students to use their background knowledge. In other words, students should be able to

articulate purposes for using the target language as they always do in their native language.

In order to make the English language classrooms filled with meaning-oriented communication, every task must be real. For example, Thai students should write a thank-you note on real note paper for the visiting speaker, not a report for the teacher or a multiple-choice quiz. Writing a penpal letter is another meaningful activity for Thai students. They can write to real penpals in different parts of the world through English language. These activities have the benefits of real purpose, real language use, and real audience.

Since English is a foreign language in Thailand, students do not have much opportunity to use the language or get access to English prints in natural settings. Although it is true that there is a wide variety of English printed materials provided, they are not involved in students' everyday lives. As a solution for this, one of the principles of whole language which is about providing language-rich environment for students should be employed in English language classrooms so that students would acquire the language naturally and they would be familiar with English printed materials.

Consequently, by providing a wide range of reading materials of all genres, students can choose what interests them most, or what meets their needs most. A language-rich environment full of poster, billboards, newspapers, and books is the cue for classroom organization. Literature-based approach is normally employed in the classroom like this (Cornett & Blankenship, 1990).

In addition, the time for independent reading should be devoted each day. Students can read for pleasure, for information, or just for the sake of reading; it depends on them. For students pursuing college degrees, for instance, they may realize that English reading skills will

open the door for them to access international journals, books and newspapers for their academic purposes. As a matter of fact, whole language also emphasizes the value of everyday reading. In addition, an important goal of any language programs in Thailand is to establish the habit of recreational reading in students so that they can use reading as a means to further their life-long learning. To accomplish this goal, therefore, a strategy like Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) suggested in whole language classrooms should be implemented in English language classrooms in Thailand.

According to Groff (1983 : 4), SSR is "an activity in which students are given a set period of time for the silent reading of materials they have selected for themselves to read." Wiesendanger and Bader (1989) study the effect of SSR on recreational reading habits after termination of instruction. They find that SSR students read more than those provided in the classroom. Most researchers tend to agree that SSR has a positive effect on reading comprehension and on students' attitudes about reading at all grade levels. They find it effective in improving reading skill (Cline & Kretke, 1980; Krashen 1985; Petrimoulx, 1988; Pyle, 1990; Sadoski, 1980; 1984; Wiesendanger, 1980).

Since choices are always the major concern in whole language situations (Mills & Clyde, 1990; Rigg, 1991; Ross, 1992) and because of the fact that every learner has different regional cultural background, e.g., students from different parts of the country have a unique culture of their local region, it is important to provide various kinds of books for the learners. It is also important to give them opportunities to select their own reading materials to match their needs, interests, and expectation.

Furthermore, it is essential to provide Thai learners with a variety of *authentic*

materials, such as articles in newspapers, magazines, brochures, etc. Reading a created paragraph for a specific sub-skill do not adequately make them become good readers. Therefore, incorporating whole language approach in the ESL reading classroom will encourage students to explore on authentic materials rather than practicing and drilling on worksheets.

More specifically, some English newspapers in Thailand have offered to fax or send selected newspaper articles, current news, stories, etc., to schools all over Thailand. Their objectives are to provide authentic materials for classroom instruction. Teachers, then, can take this opportunity to expose their students to these various texts.

Finally, it is true that the severe competition of entrance examination continues to exist and that English grammar and structure are still essential at some points and to some extent. The issue of English grammar and structure should not be eliminated from the classroom. However, instead of teaching grammar for grammar sake as happening traditionally in English classes, grammar and structure are involved in whole language classrooms in a meaningful context. Grammar would not be taught as "today's topic" as usual. It would be raised as a topic whenever students need to understand that particular point of grammar or structure in order to accomplish the tasks or to comprehend the texts.

As it is recognized in whole language philosophy that language is easier to learn when it is kept whole (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Rigg, 1991), teachers should keep language in its larger communicative context. Rather than focusing on the language itself, teachers create situations where students can use the language for authentic purposes.

## Conclusion and Discussion

For EFL students whose first language is not English, whole language may be an effective way to success since it takes the learners as the center of the learning. The learner's social interaction, and culture are also taken into the learning process. Their first language plays an important role in building the concepts of learning and facilitate the acquisition of English (Freeman & Freeman, 1992).

In Thailand where English is a foreign language, it is also essential to apply whole language to English language classrooms. The natural environment of acquiring language, the meaningful contexts, the communicative purpose, the authentic materials, and faith in the ability of students cause students to learn and acquire the target language effectively. Meaningful-based and goal-oriented techniques like free reading, SSR, journal writing, penpal letters, etc., are suggested for English language classrooms in Thailand.

Grammatical and structural components of the language are not ignored in whole language classrooms. They would be highlighted when there is a need for it. However, they are presented in context, rather than in adapted or simplified language. Students are not expected to memorize and reproduce information; instead, they construct their own understandings. Freeman & Freeman (1992 : 37) argue that

> Second language students need context-rich language so that they can understand instruction. They need to see the whole so that they know what to do with the parts. They need to be immersed in meaningful activities, not submerged in the grammatical details of a new language.

Despite the benefits of the whole-to-part instruction, as Freeman & Freeman (1992) call whole language, it is not easy for Thai teachers because school days are fragmented. Standardized tests, the college entrance examination and TOEFL in particular, encourage teachers to have their students learn bits and pieces of subjects. In addition, English language teachers in Thailand may never have personally experienced learning in a whole-to-part classroom and, in many schools, few other teachers may be trying to teach English from whole to part. Consequently, teachers need time to adjust themselves – the way they teach, and their beliefs about teaching, for example. They also need pre-service training regarding whole language principles and practices so that they will gain insight in this approach before implementing it in their classrooms.

The other obstacle is due to the fact that standardized testing is still considered accountable and significant. Many tests, including not only those constructed by schools, but also those by organizations, are still focusing on accuracy. Teachers tend to be familiar and comfortable with multiple-choice tests on English grammar and structure. Other tests like TOEFL are also based mostly on these points.

One possible solution to this problem is to introduce portfolio assessments into the classroom. Up to this point in time, standardized tests have been granted much greater respect than other classroom-based assessments. However, there has been growing recognition that in whole language classrooms, standardized tests are not effective at measuring many important student outcomes (Wolf, 1994). In whole language classroom, we encourage our students to have choices for their learning; therefore, the assessment should also conform to the instructional method. If the principles of whole language are to be established in our

English classroom environment, portfolio assessments which are more holistic should, then, be implemented since they offer an alternative means of evaluating a student's learning development in a variety of contexts. In other words, portfolios offer a broad view of student progress since it includes collaborative, authentic, multidimensional evaluative tasks which become a tangible evidence of accomplishments and skills of a person. Johns and VanLeirsburg (1993) have described the portfolio as a collection of information about performance to describe growth in literacy learning. That is, it is a way of collecting samples of students' performances to see growth in reading and writing over time (Jongsma, 1989; Hiebert & Calfee, 1990). Valencia (1990 : 340) well describes portfolio assessment as

> . . . a philosophy that demands that we view assessment as an integral part of our instruction, providing a process for teachers and students to use to guide learning. It is an expanded definition of assessment in which a wide variety of indicators of learning are gathered across many situations before, during, and after instruction. It is a philosophy that honors both the process and the products of learning as well as the active participation of the teacher and the students in their own evaluation and growth.

Last but not least, most authorities in school do not like to see their students walk around the classrooms and engage in a bunch of "fun" activities provided by whole language teachers. This is because the authorities, like school principals and superintendents, are worried about the organization of the classrooms. What is considered as a "good" classroom is the one in which students sit structurally and quietly while listening only to their teachers. As a result, it can be predicted that the school authorities may not like the idea of whole language which always encourages students to be active participants in activities. Therefore, school authorities as well as teachers have to be convinced. It would then take some time to adjust.

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