

The Needs of Chulalongkorn University Students' with Regard to Learning English and Implications for Language Instruction

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Abstract

This paper discusses three things: the importance and use of English in Thai society, a report on the students' needs with regard to the learning of English, and some possible suggestions for new materials. The introduction describes why the English language has become increasingly popular in a country in which the vehicle for interpersonal communication is largely Thai. In the second section, the author reports on a study focusing on the needs of Chulalongkorn University students and their use of the English language. The majority of students responded that they needed more practice on listening and speaking skills, as well as further practice regarding the expressions that they could use in their daily lives. The final section suggests guidelines for materials that focus on listening and speaking skills. The materials for the future curriculum are in line with Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI)'s current Development Plan as well as with its Long-Term Plan.

Introduction

English, the native language of great power nations especially the United States of America, is used virtually everywhere in the contemporary world including Thailand. This observation is borne out by Quirk (1985), who points out that hundreds of million of people whose native language is not English use the language in their daily lives. Most of these people live in countries where English is required for external purposes, namely to communicate and do business with people in other countries and catch up with the advances that are being made in the field of science and technology. According to Burchfield (1985; cited in Phillipson, 1992), English has become a "lingua franca," especially in print. Hence, educated people are depriving themselves of an important tool if they do not know the language. In Thailand, business people, academics, prominent government officials, taxi drivers

and bar girls learn English to achieve their immediate objectives, whether it be to acquire technical knowledge, to communicate with their clients or colleagues overseas, to develop the tourism industry, or simply to increase the family income (Masavisut, Sukwiwat & Wongmontha, 1986).

The teaching of EFL in Thailand grew out of the fear of foreign domination during the nineteenth century. According to Kachru (1982), English was used as "a powerful-sometimes ruthless-instrument" for religious and cultural predominance and for colonization. Since the teaching of English was first introduced, English has never dropped its importance within Thai society. The importance and use of English and the extent to which it is used in this country are illustrated in the next paragraphs.

In case studies conducted in four Asian nations, including Thailand, Kral (1986) reports

that English is regarded by Thai people as a vehicle for modernization and economic development. In a month-long survey of the classified ads in three Thai newspapers--Ban Muang, The Bangkok Post, and The Nation Review, as many as 89.5 percent of the jobs advertised required English language skills. The respondents in the study said that the English language was a resource they found crucial and upon which they relied heavily during their university studies.

In a study conducted by Shaw (1978), his Thai respondents--undergraduates in their final year of a Bachelor's degree program, responded that they "very rarely" or "never" used English with members of their family, friends, or even their English teachers. However, although English played only a small part in their lives, they anticipated using the language in business with native speakers of English and with other foreigners after they had graduated and embarked upon their careers. This study was conducted seventeen years ago; nevertheless, the findings are interesting and still applicable.

In another empirical study by Aksornkool (1985), the respondents were teachers of EFL in government schools, both at the elementary and secondary levels. The informants reported that their students used English for 0-5 percent of the time in their everyday lives. And even the majority of these teachers admitted to using English only "occasionally."

According to the literature, the English language is regarded as a tool that is vital to success in the learners' future careers. Nevertheless, the students do not get much practice in using English in their everyday lives; generally, English is seen as just another subject to be studied in the school curriculum that seems largely divorced from the students' sphere of experience.

At present, as an independent country, Thailand needs the English language for international trade. The language is essential to the nation's economic survival because it has become--almost by default the "lingua franca" of international commerce. Consequently, learning English is no longer a matter of personal preference, but a matter of necessity.

Report on the Students' Needs

In an empirical study focusing on the students' needs in terms of learning English

administered at Chulalongkorn University (Thananart, 1996), the majority of students regarded listening and speaking as the most important skills. The subjects in the study also responded that they needed to improve these selfsame skills. A large number of respondents thought that their best skill was reading, an observation that probably reflects the amount of exposure they had to this particular skill. Their materials that constitute the core of the English courses they take also focus on reading skills. Furthermore, although writing skills are emphasized as well, only a small number of students felt that they were any good at this skill. It is important to note that the majority of instructors involved in the study--both English instructors and instructors in other academic disciplines--thought that the most important skill in learning English was that of reading and that the materials for English courses should reflect this bias. Thus, there is a discrepancy in the opinions of learners and teachers in terms of the skills the University's English courses need to focus on.

Apart from using English in class, a large number of students stated that they used English in their everyday lives to look up information and check up on local entertainment and to listen for information they need, including news about entertainment. They expected that they would have to use English when embarking upon their future careers and when studying abroad. When asked about the potential skills or areas to be focused upon in any new courses, the majority of students responded that they wanted the new courses to focus on speaking and listening skills. This corresponds to the answers they gave concerning their English proficiency after taking the basic English courses currently available. After taking these courses, a number of students responded that their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing had increased. However, fewer students responded that their knowledge of listening and speaking had increased. Some students expressed a desire to practise all four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking since they are all important for communication. They also mentioned that they would like to practise the language and expressions that can be put to use in their daily lives.

The instructors of other academic disciplines who were involved in the study--from the Faculties of Engineering and

Education--were asked about their students' needs with regard to English in their future careers as engineers and educators. The majority of them responded that as regards careers their students needed to achieve competency in all the basic skills. In addition, the instructors were unanimous in stating that English was important, disagreeing only as to the degree of importance they attached to it. Some instructors thought that the language was very important, while others said that it was only moderately important. Nevertheless, nobody thought that English was not important. The majority of instructors responded that English played an important role in the particular courses that they taught. Apart from using English textbooks, the students needed English to do their research and to broaden their experience of their specific fields.

Implications for Language Instruction

According to the study, listening and speaking skills should receive greater emphasis in the basic English courses offered at the University. Consequently, the materials should include more practice on the everyday use of English for communication. Some students added that those who earned good grades for the English courses might not be successful when attempting to orally communicate in English in their everyday lives. This is because they lack practice in this area. According to Richards (1980), verbal communication is one of the main characteristics of language. Consequently, the importance of speaking--and the twin skill of listening-- needs to be examined in greater depth.

Richards (1983) claims that to understand utterances, a listener must have a script, or schema, which may be identified as "what we know about particular situations, and the goals, participants, and procedures which are commonly associated with them" (1983, p. 223). Even if the information in a particular utterance is not produced explicitly, the listeners use their existing schemata to understand the information the speaker wishes to convey. When the listeners lack corresponding script, comprehension may prove difficult. ESL/EFL learners often lack certain scripts particularly those which are specific to a culture. As a result, it is relatively difficult for them to comprehend the speech of native speakers of the target language.

Concerning the materials for practicing listening skills, Rivers and Temperly (1978) propose those which present authentic language as used by English-speaking people, whether these be monologues, dialogues or both. The language presented should be both planned and unplanned. Listening to the speech of native speakers can be problematic because the listeners only hear the voice of the speakers. In this respect, Ur (1984) suggests that the use of videotapes in the classroom can be helpful. By this method, learners can see the facial expressions, movements and other nonverbal signals made by the speaker(s) which, in turn, help them to have a better understanding of what is being said.

As for speaking, Nolasco and Arthur (1987) say that ESL/EFL learners want to use their speaking skills to give information, cooperate with others in doing something, and exchange experiences and opinions. The authors claim that ESL/EFL learners lack the opportunity to use the language for such purposes. Activities in the classroom, therefore, should promote interaction among learners. According to Richards (1980), the teaching of conversational skills in ESL/EFL classrooms is often viewed in terms of practising of oral drills or exercises derived from the study of grammar and vocabulary. Richards (1985) then suggests that role-play activities be incorporated in language teaching. Other activities promoting communication in the classroom are groupwork, pairwork, problem-solving tasks, and drama (Long, Adams, McLean, Castanos, 1976; Scarcella, 1978; Littlewood, 1981).

According to Mountford (1980), a British Council expert in Teaching Education in Thailand, the teaching and learning of English in Thailand is serious; it is mainly concerned with grammatical details. The majority of the time in class is devoted to analyzing language structures, rather than providing students with an opportunity to communicate in the target language.

Since students need to acquire a reasonable degree of competency in listening and speaking, I would like to suggest that teachers create materials that will enable students to practise the two skills. Based on the literature concerning the practice of the two skills, I would like to emphasize the type of language or expressions that are used by native speakers of English to communicate in everyday life. The materials can focus on such

functions as greeting, saying goodbye, thanking, apologizing, complimenting, etc.

Each lesson may start with short dialogues between native speakers of English which are recorded on audio cassettes. These short dialogues are used as an introduction to each lesson and as a model of correct pronunciation and intonation. The students are to practise the dialogues several times--a task which may be carried out in groups or in pairs. For the next activity, the students and teacher discuss situations in which particular expressions in the model dialogues can be used. For some functions, the level of formality is important; thus, the students should learn the appropriate expressions for each situation to avoid using language that is inappropriate in a certain social context.

A list of expressions that can be used to express each function and the responses should be provided in the materials. It would be better if the expressions are recorded on tape, so the students can listen to the native speakers' pronunciation and repeat it after listening to the tapes. After studying the expressions to be used in each situation, the students are asked to complete short dialogues for which some expressions have already been provided as clues. The students practise using the expressions--and suitable responses--in a variety of situations with their partners. They should use their own judgement in selecting the expressions and responses they claim appropriate. Feedback can be accomplished by means of peer review. In other words, each pair should then demonstrate the dialogues in front of the class, after which the other students comment as to whether the expressions and responses selected are appropriate for each particular situation.

In the next step, the students have an opportunity to provide more expressions in the target language on their own, that is, by participating in role-playing after certain cue words have been given for each situation. Each role-play may consist of more than one function to imitate the kind of oral exchange and encounter in real life. Again, feedback can be obtained through peer review.

By this method, the students are guided through a more structured exercise to a less structured one. They can develop the necessary listening and speaking skills--by listening to the conversation of native speakers of English and using the expressions and responses they have

heard and practised to produce dialogues of their own which convey the intended message.

Apart from identifying their needs, some students involved in the study said that one of the problems concerning the learning and teaching of English at the University was the difference in the level of proficiency among students in the same group, a problem also mentioned by some English language instructors. One instructor suggested that the Institute create a placement test, placing the students with the same level of proficiency in the same group to facilitate the process of learning and teaching. In my view, the appropriate placement of students is important, especially if oral and aural skills are to be emphasized. The students do not have to practise anything that is superfluous to their needs or that they already know. In addition, the size of each class should be smaller, that is, not exceeding 25. The problem raised by the subjects in the study with regard to having students of different levels of proficiency in the same class corresponds with one of the weak points in the current system analyzed in the CULI Development Plan for the years 1997-2001. It is stated in the plan that curriculum developers encounter difficulties in designing decent materials for the common basic English courses. This is because they have to produce a single set of materials for students of more than one level of proficiency. Moreover, the criteria for evaluation are applied equally to all the students enrolling in the courses. The committee designing the Development Plan recommended that the needs of students in each faculty should be taken into account. Consequently, the English language curriculum should be geared toward the needs of students in various fields as well as toward their different levels of English proficiency. The future of CULI is also shaped by a Long-Term Plan (1994-2007), which aims at producing Chulalongkorn University graduates who are well-qualified in terms of their English proficiency and are able to use the language efficiently in their careers. One strategy described in the plan is to encourage self-study method. To succeed in learning by oneself, one must have good communicative skills, especially listening and speaking. Listening skills are important for acquiring up-to-date information; speaking skills are used for discussing or exchanging opinions and in

keeping abreast of the progress that is being made in the students' individual fields.

Conclusion

As an international language, English, plays an important role in contemporary Thai society. Every Chulalongkorn University graduate should have a good command of English before he or she joins the workforce. The needs the students expressed with regard to

learning English were relatively different from what the instructors expected. The students, at present, regard interpersonal communication with foreigners as very important and want to acquire a reasonably high level of proficiency in English in order to achieve that goal. The two major plans which govern CULI's academic policy take students' needs into account since they are more likely to reflect current realities.

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