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## Interview With Ajarn Mayuri Sukwiat

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Ajarn Mayuri Sukwiat is the author of numerous papers, articles, reviews and reports as well as textbooks on English language teaching, communication, culture and literature. Mrs. Sukwiat was educated at Master Dei School, Chulalongkorn University, the University of Nottingham, the University of Michigan, and Indiana University. She was awarded a Certificate in English Studies Overseas in 1950 and a B.A. with Honours in English from Nottingham in 1954; a Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Michigan in 1957 followed by an M.A.T. in American Literature from Indiana

in 1958. She taught English and served as Head of the English Division, Faculty of Humanities, at the College of Education in Prasarnmit for many years. Then, in 1968, she was appointed Director of the Central Institute of English Language (CIEL), Office of University Affairs, a post she held until 1976 when she joined the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii. She was a Research Fellow there until 1982. Since 1982 she has been an Academic Consultant for the School of Liberal Arts at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University.

In commemoration of Ajarn Mayuri's 60th birthday, *PASAA* is honoured to present the following interview in which she describes her experiences as teacher, researcher and administrator, as well as her views on English language teaching, learning and research in general.

**In what ways do you think CIEL during your directorship helped shape language teaching in Thailand?**

CIEL was set up to fulfill two types of goals. The short term goal was to provide intensive courses to university staff who were going to further their study abroad in the fields of basic sciences as specified by the University Development Commission. The long term goal was to help improve English language teaching at all levels.

As for the short term goal, CIEL managed to fulfill that goal. We offered several intensive courses to university staff from all over the country and later on we extended our services to personnel from other government agencies as well.

For the long term goal, we drew up areas of activities that would help improve the teaching situation. The major ones were teacher training or staff development and coordination of ELT efforts from various agencies, both Thai and foreign agencies. During that time there were many foreign agencies which were set up to help several Thai institutions. It was deemed then that there ought to be a central body which coordinated their efforts by, for example,

conducting seminars or workshops, writing materials and training teachers in various areas.

I think teacher training and staff development began to take shape quite well. Besides, we did not only concentrate on Bangkok but also went out to help run courses in many places, especially provincial universities and teachers colleges all over the country

All in all, I think many agencies now coordinate efforts instead of working independently. Therefore, these two goals were fulfilled in a way. Later on when CIEL was moved to Chulalongkorn University and became CULI (Chulalongkorn University Language Institute), these two objectives remained and are still carried out by CULI's staff.

**How was the English journal established?**

When the Center itself was well established, we thought that there was a need for a publication to help disseminate ideas and suggestions concerning language learning and teaching to colleagues at all levels, not just the university level. Our original idea was to encourage Thai teachers to write for the Journal. Articles could be written in Thai or in English. At first the publication was called a "bulletin." The founding editor

was Mr. Michael Smithies who I believe has contributed an article in this special issue. Later on when the Center engaged itself in other areas such as linguistic research and minority language studies, we saw a need to broaden the scope of the publication to cover not only ELT but also other aspects of language and language education. Therefore, the name was changed to PASAA, the name being suggested by the late Prof. M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvann, one of the advisors and supporters of CIEL, and the editorship was assumed by Dr. Lyle Bachman, who was then one of the Ford Foundation specialists.

**Of all the articles and books you have published, could you name some of them you think have had a great impact on language learning and teaching in Thailand?**

I'm afraid most of my articles have little to do with language teaching and learning in Thailand. From my curriculum vitae you probably have learned that later in my career I did not do much teaching and felt that I was not well versed in this area.

Although most of my articles have little to do with language teaching and learning in Thailand, there were three surveys I was commissioned to conduct which concerned the state of ELT in Thailand. In these I have mentioned the problems of ELT and included recommendations.

The first survey, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, was conducted in the 60's. A lot of money was spent on this survey, but unfortunately none of the high ranking officials of the Ministry of Education read our report. When the SEAMEO Language Center was to be set up in

Singapore, that report became of some use. It served as a background document for the ELT situation in Thailand at that time.

The second survey was done for the University Development Commission before the setting up of CIEL. The survey was undertaken to assess the situation of ELT at the university level. This, then, led to the establishment of CIEL in 1968. One might think that it had some great impact; at least, the government realized for the first time the importance of ELT as a profession and that there was a need to set up a central body that would help develop that profession for the good of the whole country.

The third report was commissioned by a foreign agency, namely USIA in Washington, D.C. Its rationale was to help their policy to assist the U.S. agency in carrying out ELT activities in Thailand. I was rather satisfied with this report but I really doubt whether many Thai policy makers have read it. As I was no longer serving the government then, it was not my job to advertise it. I secretly hope that some Thai agencies might consider publishing it for wider circulation. But again, it is not my personality to promote my own work.

Regarding books, I should mention the course book called *Interaction* published by Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. The merit of this textbook is worth examining. As one of the authors, I should not evaluate it; however, I was rather satisfied with the result of the textbook. The structure of the text was based on the study my colleague, John Fieg, and I carried out while working at the Culture Learning Institute of the East West Center in 1980. Probably it is the first textbook that encompasses

cultural aspects and linguistic content. Most textbooks that were on the market and widely used in schools had very good linguistic content but lacked the cultural aspect. Indeed, I was personally gratified at the outcome.

**What are some of your experiences as a research fellow in Hawaii?**

The best time I had in a foreign country was when I had the chance to be a research fellow in Hawaii, and it was most rewarding. This is because I had ample opportunity to work with students and scholars from many different countries as well as different social and cultural backgrounds. It is an ideal place for researchers to conduct linguistic and cultural research because scholars and students with varying linguistic, cultural, social and educational backgrounds work together. In this particular set-up I learned a lot, especially about cross-cultural understanding. I learned a lot about people, their beliefs and aspirations along with their ways of communicating with one another. Moreover, it made me more aware of my own cultural heritage, set-up, and language. This experience helped broaden my outlook and world view. It also gave me first-hand knowledge about people and somehow equipped me with a strategy of how to be with people in an international arena. All in all, I became a more broad-minded and internationally-minded person with a broader perception of other people from different backgrounds.

**After many years of experience as a teacher, researcher and administrator, you must have had several accomplishments. Which of these roles do you think is completely fulfilled?**

I like my role as a teacher. Looking as far back as 1954 when I first started

teaching, I struggled a lot trying to be an effective teacher. I wasn't really trained for this profession. It is learning by trial and error in an effort to become a good teacher. I have no way of assessing myself whether I was a good teacher or not. But the feedback I received from my former students, their comments being "oh, I used to hate English until I was in your class" or "when you started teaching me I began to be interested in English," reassured me that I must have done well as a teacher. I enjoy teaching and the contact with students. I think I would never change it for any other career.

In terms of research, I just began to learn the trade. I had no formal education in research methodology. It's purely my common sense and my own interest to carry on some research which led me to undertake tasks in this area. In fact, I don't think I can call myself a researcher, just a beginner.

As an administrator, I ended up with high blood pressure and a heart disease which still remain with me. Therefore, I am not looking forward to any administrative work at all.

**In terms of teachers' training you have introduced, through foreign experts coming to CIEL, new trends in English teaching such as ESP, EST, Aptitude Testing, etc. What do you think is most important?**

During the days of CIEL we had some foreign experts helping us. Since we were responsible for conducting intensive courses for people in the scientific area, we had to do something to help them learn the language and to master it in order to be able to study abroad (in the area). So we had to find a way in which something could be

done quickly and effectively in terms of material development and arrangement of intensive courses. Testing is also very important, otherwise we would waste more time finding out how well students performed.

I don't think I can say what aspect is most important. These things are integrated and they ought to go together. How can you teach without testing? If you teach without testing, you don't know how much the students learn or if the students don't learn anything at all. You must then improve your teaching.

The purpose of the learner is important as well; otherwise, you might waste time if you treat students the same way, give them the same course and material.

Therefore, I think all these three go together. At CIEL we tried to carry out these three areas together whether we ran intensive courses, teacher training, etc.

**In your opinion, what directions should language learning and teaching be developed and also research along the same lines?**

I would like to separate teaching and learning for the sake of clarity. First of all, we must admit that language teaching is a serious profession. It should not be taken for granted. It is wrong to assume that anyone who knows the language can teach it. Teachers themselves must regard language teaching as a respectable profession—a career that they can be proud of; otherwise, they cannot do a good job. Therefore, if we regard language teaching in this way, it should be developed like any other profession such as doctors and engineers. Those engaged in teaching must be equipped with adequate knowledge, skills and techniques or methods. On-the-job training is important for doctors

and teachers alike. Teachers have to be serious about their profession and should not let other people look down on their profession. It's an obsolete idea that anyone can teach or anyone who knows the language can teach it.

As for language learners, they must begin with a purpose. They should ask themselves why they should want or need to learn this particular language. They should come up with a purpose.

I think motivation is the key. Learners can be motivated either by teachers or materials, or both. Besides this, learners must also be convinced that learning a language needs constant practice, interaction and participation. Like practicing a musical instrument, practicing a language also requires interaction. You cannot communicate without interaction. If one is not willing to learn, practice or interact in language activities, language cannot be learned.

Therefore, all three aspects are important and the learner ought to pay attention to them.

With regard to research, it should not be viewed as a special task. I don't look at research with a capital R. The term research can scare a lot of people, but I think we ought to change the attitude of language teachers. Actually research can be done at many levels. Language teachers can do research in their own classroom. They don't need to do field work or elaborate research. Although they need to be equipped with some basic research methodology, they do not need to spend four years or any length of time to incorporate research in their own teaching. The important thing is that they must develop a keen sense of observation and an interest in data collecting. This

awareness is still lacking among language teachers and because they are afraid of the word "research," they avoid it. Research can be fun. If you know how to, you can do your own research in your own classroom. Eventually they can find ways to improve their teaching.

**What is your opinion about communicative language teaching and to what extent can it claim success?**

In my opinion, the term "communicative" is redundant. I was rather amazed at the way people got excited and jumped on the bandwagon. For me, anything to do with language learning and teaching has to be communicative. Therefore, there is no need for the term "communicative." Language is already concerned with communication.

I cannot very well assess the extent of its success since I have little contact with classroom situations. But from what I know or hear, the success may be in the area of language proficiency or fluency. Nowadays Thai students are quite fluent in spoken English whereas ten years ago they were only good in reading. So the success may be that students have become fluent and confident in using the language.

What is sadly lacking, however, is "appropriateness." Teachers are not quite concerned with *how* people say but mainly stress *what* they say. If communicative teaching does not include pragmatics, it cannot claim success in being able to communicate. So far, however, not much attention is paid at all to pragmatics, especially in the Thai context.

**To what extent has Teaching English as an International Language changed the trends of language learning and teaching in Thailand?**

First of all, it has changed the outlook on the roles of English. Before, we seemed to be concerned with the *status* of English and we did not carefully examine the many *roles* of English. Before, we seemed to spend our energy on how we could please the speakers of English by trying to copy the way they pronounced words or their accent. We were afraid that we might lose face if we used Thai English which is a false concept. If we know the role of English as an international language and we use English as a tool to communicate with non-Thais, then we will be more confident in ourselves and don't have to become near native speakers. We must try to use English internationally. We must develop strategies to understand other non-Thais when they communicate with us in English. We should be able to understand Japanese or Indians speaking English to us in a conference, seminars or business negotiations. At the same time we must try to make others including native speakers understand our way of using English. Strategies in interpreting English used in the international area can be and should be developed. So far I don't have evidence of large scale efforts in Thai institutions yet in this area. Maybe CULI should be the leader. It will be a pity if we don't do it because the goal of the country now is to develop international trade, international information systems, etc. We should really take up this particular area in teacher training and national development.

**Do you have any suggestions for language teachers and learners?**

I don't have any new or original suggestions. What I can say is what is already obvious. Language teachers must love their teaching. They must love their students; otherwise, they should not be in this profession. If they like teaching and students, they can do many things to motivate them to learn. Learners themselves must have a purpose in learning a language. They must be able to answer *why* they need to learn English. If they see no use

for it, they should either take up another language or not be bothered with it at all. They also must rely on themselves a lot. They should keep practising. What they learn from class or textbooks is just a drop of sand. It helps, but they have to do the practising part. Like musicians (practising their music) and singers (practising their singing), learners must practise their skill. There is no short cut to mastering a language. The road to success is not always paved with rose petals.