
The Role of English in Thailand: Transition and Tradition

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I am pleased to be here and happy to bring you greetings from the East-West Center. Victor Hao Li the EWC president, and Mary Bitterman, the director of the Institute of Culture and Communication have sent best wishes for a successful national seminar.

I want to publicly thank USIS for their assistance in making it possible for me to be here. My sincere congratulations to Chulalongkorn University Language Institute for the organization of this national seminar on "English for International Communication." I don't know of another national seminar in Asia that has been devoted to this topic. I don't believe there is any place in Southeast Asia better suited to lead the region in considering the use of English internationally than Thailand. The topic is closely akin to the original policy on foreign language adapted by King Mongkut in 1850. The program begun by King Mongkut was continued by King Chulalongkorn. It is fortuitous that this seminar is held so close to October 23, the day we celebrate the memory of King Chulalongkorn. This university was founded by King Vajiravudh and named for his father. The topic of this seminar is so appropriate because it is in accord with a program and policy established more than 100 years ago by these fine Thai leaders. The seminar is even more meaningful as it becomes a part of the celebration of His Majesty's auspicious sixtieth birthday. At the East-West Center we remember with much aloha His Majesty's visit in 1967 when he dedicated a Thai "sala" on our campus. His Majesty has demonstrated understanding, cooperation, and international goodwill throughout his life. He was born in the United States, educated in Switzerland, and is internationally orientated but he is completely Thai. What an excellent example he is for all of us. As we celebrate His Majesty's sixtieth year, we look forward to his continued leadership for many years to come. As His Majesty begins a new cycle, this is a landmark for Thailand, a new age. This seminar, dedicated to His Majesty should also mark a fresh outlook on Thailand's use of English.

Today English has an unusual role among the languages of the world. Never before in the recorded history of our planet has there been a language to equal the global spread and use of English. With this spread, many different Englishes have developed. One might say, "Hold on a minute, those are varieties of English. There is only one language, English, not Englishes". There are several of us who believe that the functional and formal variations in English, in different parts of the world, is so great that it demands the term Englishes. I will maintain that position today. The language now belongs to those who use it as their first language and to those who use it as an additional language. The recognition of the functional diversity is so important that I have tried to indicate it by using the term Englishes. I want to stress the point today that the time has come for native and non-native users of English to be considered equal partners in deliberations on English and its teaching internationally. Since non-native users far out number native users, perhaps non-native users should be "first among equals" in any deliberation about English. Certainly in the developing world where English has become one of the most vital tools of ideological and social change, non-native users of English must be the decision makers. It needs to be made clear that all speakers of English can use the language as a vehicle to share the vast Western and non-Western expertise, experience, and tradition.

I mentioned earlier that native and non-native users of English are equal partners in deliberations on English and its teaching. I am talking about teaching English as an International Language (EIL), not English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). Because Thailand is usually described as a country where English is used as a foreign language, let's compare EIL with EFL. There are three categories where the differences are significant: 1) Potential Interactors; 2) Cultural Emphasis and 3) Performance Target.

In EFL classes in Thailand, students are almost always trained to interact with native speakers -- Americans or Britons. This does not reflect the real world where Thais use English to interact with almost every nationality on earth. Of course Thais need to know how to interact with people from the United States and Great Britain but they must also be prepared to represent themselves in English with Japanese, Indians, Germans, Chinese, the Soviets, and other members of the international community. There are probably now more interactions taking place in English when both parties are non-native speakers of English than there are between native and non-native speakers of English. Leading Thai educators were aware of this in 1977 when the National Education Scheme was established. That Scheme set up new objectives for the study of English and one of them was "to promote the understanding of other cultures, with a view to bringing about harmony and friendship among nations". That replaced an objective which had read "to impart an understanding of the culture of the English-speaking peoples". The change from the promotion of an understanding of the culture of the English-speaking peoples to the understanding of other cultures was indeed a great improvement.

The second category of significant difference between EIL and EFL is related to the first. In EFL classes the cultural emphasis is placed on the cultures of native English speakers and on training non-native speakers to use English as native speakers do. In EIL classes there is a multi-cultural dimension with emphasis placed on how to learn about cultures different from one's own. Emphasis is also placed on how to represent one's own culture through English.

The third category is related to the second. In EFL classes the performance target is to sound and act like an educated native speaker of English. In EIL classes, in Thailand, the performance target is to sound and act like an educated Thai speaking English. This in no way lowers our standards. Thai speakers of educated English are intelligible to other nationalities in international contexts they use educated English syntax. In EIL classes we must expect no less from our students, but we should not try and make their pronunciation identical to that of an American or an English person. Americans would certainly revolt if they were told the only way to be understood is to have a British pronunciation. British students would revolt if told they had to sound like Americans. It just isn't true, and British and American students know it. Neither is it true that Thais must have a native-speaker accent to be understood. Thais must be intelligible, comprehensible, and interpretable to those with whom they interact in the same way that anyone else (native or non-native) must be when speaking English. Educated syntax is virtually the same all over the world and Thais must learn to use it the same way that everyone else does. There are some major differences however when it comes to patterns of discourse. EFL students are taught that they must change their discourse patterns when using English to match those of native English speakers. In EIL classes students are taught that meaning across cultures must be negotiated. Students are not expected nor encouraged to leave their styles of discourse but they are taught how to explain themselves in English and how to seek clarification from others. Students should not be surprised when misunderstanding occurs in international settings and should know how to correct/repair such misunderstanding.

Teaching English as an International Language (EIL) is not easier than teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Perhaps it is more difficult, but it is certainly more in accord with the foreign language policy established by King Mongkut in the 1850s and it is more likely to produce appropriate results for countries like Thailand in transition.

We hear a great deal these days about Thailand being in transition and how important English is for that transition. Thailand is in transition from an agricultural country to a newly industrialized country. Science and technology are important in industrial countries and English is the international language of science and technology. Thailand is in transition from local, family owned businesses to joint ventures with multi-national corporations and English is the international language of business.

Thailand is a part of South East Asia and this region is in great transition. English is the language of regional cooperation and assistance among the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Thailand is a member of the world community which is also in transition and Thailand has chosen to use English as a medium to receive information and technology from the world at large. Recently the leader of the Soviet Union's space program said, "English is the first necessity" for any scientist. Thailand recognized this years ago and has pursued a policy of learning English for international advancement.

Transition means change and the changes in Thailand, and the rest of South East Asia, are taking place at a rapid pace. Although the entire world is changing, the developing world, of which Thailand is an important part, is changing most dramatically. Not all of these changes are good. There is more crime, more debt, and less respect for traditional authority. Today we often hear people talk about "the golden age of yesteryear", and how Thailand is not the same as it was in the 50s and 60s. The moral character is changing we are told. Mutual respect and trust are not like they were before. The reasons given for these bad changes are related to the modernization of the country--or the Westernization--or the Americanization. I've never heard anyone say the problems of modernity are due to the study of English, but I have a feeling that English teachers are often suspected of being less than completely loyal to Thai traditions.

This can present an identity problem for Thai teachers of English and for Thai students of English. The many good changes of modernization taking place all over the country are frequently related to English and this is a positive association. The erosion of cultural tradition is also frequently related to English and this is a negative association. Teachers and students of English may wonder about their own identity. "Am I a positive agent of change for a progressive future?" or "Am I a part of a system which makes it easier for foreigners to exploit my country and manipulate her people?" These are serious questions representing complex situations. They are not new questions. Thais have struggled with them for a long time. It has been said that the Thais are ingenious for absorbing outside influence while retaining their own identity and fiercely guarding their treasured independence. This has certainly been true in the past and I hope it will be true in the future.

I would like to remind you that English is not just a medium of receiving information from the outside, but it is also the language Thais use to represent themselves to the rest of the world. Whatever it means to be a Thai in the 21st century and whatever position Thailand takes in the international community; their positions and characteristics will be expressed internationally in English. May I suggest that you keep this in mind as you teach English, as you write curriculum materials, and as you train teachers. In the middle of great transition, your students will need a solid individual identity. You will need to not only help them develop this identity, but also give them the skills to express this identity in English.

As for the projection of a national identity through English, Japan offers a very good example. Japan is using English very successfully to negotiate with the rest of the world and is at the same time remaining very Japanese. Japan is one of the most industrialized nations on earth; she is extremely modern--perhaps even post-modern, but she remains very Japanese. As far as the teaching of English in Japan is concerned, Prof. Takao Suzuki of Keio University has argued that English teaching in Japan should change from emphasizing the conventional "receiver" type to emphasizing the "sender" type in order to express Japanese culture.

If we take this “receiver” and “sender” perspective on English for Thailand, it is clear that for the “receiver” side Thailand has received through English science and technology as well as international business and tourism. For the “sender” side, the picture isn’t so clear. What can Thailand contribute through English to the international community? Let me suggest three Thai traditional characteristics: 1) A Proper Priority for Spiritual Values ; 2) Features of the Thai Concept of Self, and 3) A Sense of Relationships.

Let’s take them one by one: the first, A Proper Priority for Spiritual Values. From my perspective, the modern world is suffering from the struggle of two opposing spiritual camps. Both are equally dangerous. One is called “Materialism” and it feeds on pride and greed. People are viewed only as consumers with profit as the principle motive for living. The other is called “Fundamentalism” and it feeds on ideology and ethnocentrism. The world, for these people, is divided into groups of either “the converted” or “the heathen”. I sense a great deal of fear among this camp, but little compassion. If there is any country in the world that can offer corrective measures for this dilemma, I believe it is Thailand. Thailand is a country with a population concerned about spiritual matters but also with an acceptance for differences in matters of belief. There are many Thai Buddhists, but there are also Thai Hindus, Thai Muslims, Thai Christians and Thai Taoists. These people recognize the importance of spiritual values but they don’t insist that everyone believe exactly as they do. His Majesty the King is called the Defender of the Buddhist Faith and Upholder of all Religions. I urge you to join him in his noble efforts.

The second traditional characteristic that Thailand has and that the world needs now is the Thai concept of self. There are many admirable features of the Thai concept of self, but the feature I want to call your attention to is the wonderful Thai sense of humor. Most of us in the world take ourselves much too seriously. We have become so “responsible” and so “concerned” about things like population, pollution, and nuclear proliferation, that we can hardly smile and seldom laugh. Our example again should be His Majesty the King. When he was visiting Paramount Pictures Studio in L.A. in 1960 he made the following remark, . . . “most of our Thai people are great filmgoers and follow the careers of their favorite stars with the keenest interest. I may say a little regretfully that many youthful “fans” sometimes know more about the film stars than they do about their subjects at school”. On this occasion the press and studio personnel had been requested not to mention the famous American film “The King and I” because it was felt to be too delicate. Later in the same speech His Majesty said the following, “I would like now to confide in something just between the King and you. It’s about the “The King and I”. He went on to say that personally he had a high regard for this film and might have recommended it had he not known the historical facts and the sentiments of Thai people. The traditional Thai sense of humor which is such an important part of the Thai concept of self needs to be contributed to the rest of the world. The world needs to learn how to cope with serious problems while at the same time learn how to lighten the load of life with laughter. Thais can teach the rest of us that and we will benefit from it greatly.

The third traditional characteristic that Thailand has which the world needs is a sense of relationships. A sense not of independence but *interdependence* between people and nature, between the human and the divine, between students and teachers, between parents and children, and between leaders and followers. The modern person is often lonely, even when she/he is not alone. Part of this is due to the lack of a sense of relationships. This sense of relationships is highly developed in Thailand and it is developed along with a keen sense of independence. It is clear in Thailand that a person need not give up his/her individuality in order to find solidarity in relationships. The rest of the world needs to be reminded of this.

Now you may be saying, "How can we contribute these Thai traditional characteristics to the rest of the world?" You can do it in the same way that you have received the factors of transition-- through English. We have some good examples of how it can be done : Whenever Dr. Surin Pitsuwan interacts in English with international government authorities, he makes good use of these three traditional Thai characteristics. Acharn Nitaya Masavisut and Khunying Cham-nongsri Rutnin are emphasizing these characteristics in the stories and Thai legends they are translating into English for the rest of the world to read. Creative Thai writers who write originally in English like Prajuab Thirabutana and Pira Sudham deal with the essence of these traditional Thai characteristics and are helping the rest of the world to understand them. These examples should be followed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in all mass communication for foreigners which is done in English, and in materials in English from the Tourism Authority.

Thailand has received a great deal from the rest of the world through English. As a result she is a country in transition. Thailand has an equally important contribution to give to the world that must be done through English. I believe the most important contribution Thailand can make is in the form of some of her essential traditions. The role of English in Thailand is important for transition and it is also important for tradition. I hope you will help others to see this and that whenever possible you will work to equip Thai students with the abilities in English to receive from and to give to the rest of the world. I wish you well.

The Author

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