

## Who Are the Best English Teachers in Thailand?

---

Larry E. Smith  
East-West Center

I should begin saying that I am talking about the teaching of English as an international language (EIL) in Thailand and not the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). If we limit ourselves to the teaching of EFL, the best teachers in Thailand are often native speaking foreigners. That is not the case however with English as an international language.

The title of this national seminar is "English for International Communication" so perhaps we should define some of these terms as we begin. "Communication" is a word used frequently these days with many different meanings. For our purposes at this seminar let us agree to define communication as "sharing meaning." This is not limited to face to face interaction but includes all types and modes of interaction; person to person, text and media, as well as symbolic. It should be emphasized that meaning is not in language but in people and it must be negotiated by the parties involved in the interaction. "International" refers to interactions between individuals or parties of different nations. "English" in this case refers to English as an international language (EIL), not English as a foreign language (EFL). EIL is not the same as EFL. I call your attention to an article by Professor Peter Strevens in the October, 1987, issue of the *English Teaching Forum* (Volume XXV Number 4) entitled "English as an International Language." Professor Strevens does an excellent job explaining the difference between the two and points out that "we need to recognize that in the great nonnative speaker populations, English is being taught mostly *by* non-native speakers of the language, *to* nonnative speakers, in order to communicate mainly *with* non-native speakers." This is an effective reminder that the fastest growing category of English users is the L2 category and that the most frequent interactions in English are taking place between L2 and L2 users not between L1 and L2. Students in Thailand must be prepared to interact with other nonnative speakers of English in addition to native speakers. They must learn how to use English as an educated Thai in international contexts to establish and maintain contacts, to seek and give information, to make references to and transmit what has been heard or read, and to convey opinion and negotiate meaning. The standards of use are based on intelligibility, grammaticality, and appropriateness. Users of English must be intelligible; otherwise no matter how important their message, it will be lost. Educated users of English must be grammatical in their use of the language. One may understand a student who says, "I miss too much my mother." but an English teacher cannot accept that as being sufficient. Thai students must be prepared to represent Thailand using English in international settings. They can do this well only if they know how to use standard grammatical English in their speech and writing. Thai students of English must learn that English is like Thai and all other languages in that one can be intelligible and grammatical and still not communicate effectively unless one uses appropriate language for different situations. Knowing when to be formal or informal is very important in international contexts. The use of technical jargon, slang, and formulaic expressions may all be appropriate in different settings but one must learn the appropriateness of each of them. Topics of discussion may differ in appropriateness across cultures and students must learn how important this is for effective cross-cultural communication in English. In EIL classes students learn that although language and culture

are inextricably tied together, a language is not inextricably tied to a particular culture. The language of the speaker is tied to the culture of the speaker. English is not tied to American/British/Western culture. It may be helpful to know something about British and American culture, but if Thais are going to use English with many different nationalities, they must learn something about the cultures of those nationalities.

With this preamble out of the way, let us now look at the question we are to address: *Who are the best teachers of English in Thailand?* Let's talk about the attributes of the best teachers and begin with nationality. The best teachers of EIL in Thailand are Thai nationals. They may be ethnically Chinese, Indian, Malay, Lao, or Thai, but they are Thai nationals. If we are training Thai students to interact as educated Thais with non-Thais, the best teachers of English are educated Thais. They know the problems Thai students have in learning to use English and they know the life experience of students in Thailand. They can be the best role models for Thai students. Native English speaking foreigners are often the best teachers of EFL in Thailand because they are preparing students to interact with native speakers, but in EIL classes students must be taught to interact with all non-Thais, not just native speakers, and foreigners may be good at this but never best. Foreigners do not know how to interact as a Thai and that is exactly what students must be taught to do. Foreigners do not know how Thais are likely to feel in international situations therefore they cannot help Thai students use those feelings to their advantage. Concerning the attribute of nationality, there can be no doubt, Thai nationals are the best English teachers in Thailand.

The next attribute we'll discuss is training/education. The best teachers of EIL have sufficient training/education to give them a sense of belonging to a profession and of being professionals. The best teachers never feel that they have enough training/education, but they are not searching for "the royal road" to language teaching, the one "right" teaching approach, method, or technique. The best teachers read and write for professional journals like *World Englishes*, *PASAA* and *English Language Teaching*. The best teachers read what is written in English about Thailand by Thais and non-Thais. There are novels like *Little Things* by Prajuab Tirabutana, and *Monsoon Country* by Pira Sudham; essays like *Essay on Thai Folklore* by Phya Anuman Rajadhon; poetry by Chamnongsri L. Rutnin; and books of proverbs like *On Thai Proverbs and Sayings...* by Duangtip S. Surintatip. There are publications of the National Identity Board like this excellent proverbs book and a factual text called, *Thailand in the 80s* as well as the beautiful book, *Childhood Stories from Thailand*, edited by Nitaya Masavisut, which contains stories translated from Thai into English. There are many good books which have been translated into English which the best English teachers are familiar with. Among those books are *The Capital* by Wanich Jarunggidanan, *The Judgement* by Chart Kobjitti, and *Letters from Thailand* by Botan. It is important for teachers of English to know about works like all of these because they are the materials that non-Thais read to learn about Thailand. The materials have been written in or translated into English and teachers of English may find that they do not agree with all that has been written. Whatever the case, this information will help teachers of English prepare Thai students to interact with non-Thais internationally.

The third attribute for us to consider is proficiency in English. The best teachers of English are not satisfied with their proficiency in English and are always trying to improve their communicative abilities, but they recognize that they are far superior to their students in ability and that they can help students learn how to use English to communicate with non-Thais. The best teachers of English realize that greater proficiency in English is not a matter of fewer grammatical errors but of greater ability in communicating across cultures. The best teachers know that misunderstandings frequently occur when people try to communicate, no matter what language is used or what the relationship is between the parties involved. Certainly misunderstandings occur

when the people involved are from different cultures and they know little about each other. Some people may even come to the international setting with prejudice or some misconception about the people involved. The best teachers know how to recognize such problems and know how to help students to be able to recognize and correct or repair breakdowns in communication when they occur. The best teachers of English believe that their proficiency in English can improve and will improve as they teach their students to use English internationally.

The fourth attribute to discuss is experience. The best teachers of English in Thailand have had or are getting experience in using English across cultures. They may be working with a multi-national group, writing to a foreign pen-pal, doing a foreign correspondence course from radio or TV, doing refugee work, or any number of other possibilities. If our goal is to prepare students to interact across cultures in English, the best teachers are those that have done/are doing that successfully. The best teachers of English in Thailand have had experience in the Thai educational system and know the advantages and disadvantages of the system. They have been successful in the system and know how to help students become successful in the system. Once again, Thai nationals are obviously at an advantage here over foreigners. It is easier for Thai students to believe that they too can succeed in the Thai educational system if they have teachers who have gone through the same system and are successful.

The fifth attribute is one of the most important attributes of the best teachers of English in Thailand. They have a genuine interest in helping students achieve success in cross-cultural communication. They are not trying to live their lives through their students, but they are interested in the goals and objectives of their students and they are not afraid to offer suggestions or directions. They want to help their students aim for integrity in all they do and to realize that principle is more important than expediency. They want to enable students to be themselves in English when interacting internationally.

The attributes of training, proficiency, and experience can be low if the attribute of helping others is very high, but if this attribute is low, no amount of training, proficiency, or experience can make up for it.

Are you familiar with the term "burnt-out"? I hope you are familiar with the concept but not the feeling itself. The best teachers of English can become burnt-out if they don't recognize the symptoms and take preventive measures. One of the symptoms is the decrease in interest in helping students succeed in cross-cultural communication.

These five attributes describe the best teachers of English in Thailand. There are many such teachers and they can be found all over the country in the formal educational system at every level of English instruction. I know this to be true for I have met some of them and visited some of their classes. I'm sure you know many more of them than I do. I encourage you to keep in contact with them and share ideas as well as disappointments. This will help to prevent burn-out. One can also find some of the best teachers of English outside the formal educational system. I have met some of them in business, in tourist related activities, and in religious or charity organizations. This is important for you to remember so that you can associate with the best teachers no matter where they may be employed.

If I were asked to give some advice to people who wanted to become one of the best teachers of English in Thailand, I would suggest three things: 1) Be Prepared, 2) Do Your Best, and 3) Be Yourself.

There is no substitute for preparation. Study, training, and education are life-long experiences for any teacher. English teachers must practice using the language and prepare themselves for all types of interactions. Teachers must prepare themselves for every lesson. The goals and objectives must be very clear to them. They must be familiar with the material being used

to accomplish the goals and be ready to supplement the material or modify the goals if necessary. Teachers need to know the goals of their students. They cannot be fully prepared to teach if they don't. "Why are the students studying English?" "What are their problems in using English?" "What opportunities do the students have to practice the English they know?" Teachers must know what is happening in their students' lives outside of English class. If any student is having a serious personal problem, it will effect all of his potential for learning. A part of preparation for the teacher is to know when students are experiencing such problems and be ready to adjust his/her teaching strategies accordingly.

It may sound trite, but it is very important to *do your best*. Teachers should establish high goals for themselves. They should not worry about abilities they don't have but emphasize, and use, those features which they do possess to the best of their ability. I don't know of any ideal situations where everything is perfect for teaching English. The best teachers don't allow their less-than-ideal surroundings to prevent them from doing their best in those surroundings.

Perhaps it is most important to *be yourself*. One should not try to be someone else. It will never seem genuine. Students need to be instructed by originals, not copies. The best teachers don't pretend to be anyone else or act like anyone else. Each of us is unique. Teachers are unique and so are students. If we will be ourselves using and teaching English, it is much more likely that our students will learn to be themselves as users of English too. There is a story I like very much which relates to this. More than 2,000 years ago the Lord Buddha was asked by a Hindu Brahmin, "Who are you? Are you a god, a demi-god, or a man?" After only a moment's hesitation, the Lord Buddha replied, "I am awake." Self awareness is the base line of communication. Each of us must be awake and aware that we can only be ourselves and that we can use English to communicate ourselves to others.

Who are the best teachers of English as an international language in Thailand? Any educated Thai with adequate proficient in English, some international experience, and an interest in helping students develop their cross-cultural communication skills can be one of the best. If you are not one now, I urge you to become one. It is possible. It takes time and energy but it is well worth the effort.

## References

- Botan. (1982). *Letters from Thailand*. Bangkok.
- Chart Kobjitti. (1983). *The judgement*. Bangkok: Reun Kaew.
- Duangtip S. Surintatip. (1985). *On Thai proverbs and sayings*. Bangkok: National Identity Board.
- National Identity Board. (1984). *Thailand in the 80s*. Bangkok: National Identity Board.
- Nitaya Masavisut (Ed.) (1987). *Childhood stories from Thailand*. Bangkok: National Identity Board.
- Phya Anuman Rajadhon. (1981). *Essay on Thai folklore*. Bangkok: Duang Kamol.
- Pira Sudham. (1987). *Monsoon country*. Bangkok: Siam Media International Books.
- Prajuab Thirabutana. (1971). *Little things*. Sydney: William Collins (Australia) Ltd.
- Stevens, Peter. (1987). English as an international language. *English Teaching Forum*, 25 (4), October, 56-63.
- Wanich Jarunggidanan. (1985). *The capital*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn Translation Center.