

Teaching and Learning English in Thailand : Some Problems and Remedies

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Five problems are identified that contribute to less than successful English teaching in educational institutions in Thailand. Five approaches towards remedying these problems are discussed. These 'remedies' of course create further problems, and two of these are discussed in more detail.

The British Council, and its ELT experts funded under British Government Technical Cooperation agreements with the government of Thailand, work in every sector of the educational system in Thailand in support English language teaching programmes, with the exception of Primary Education.

This involves working with teachers :

- through courses, seminars and workshops on in-service teacher training programmes to improve teaching standards,
- advising on and helping to improve existing teaching and training materials, and develop new materials, and
- helping institutions to build up resources for both teachers and students.

It involves working with individual teachers, and groups of teachers, with trainers and trainees, with academic staff and administrators, in schools, colleges, and universities. It involves visiting institutions all over Thailand, observing teachers at work in classroom, staffrooms, libraries; it involves listening to teachers, talking with teachers, reading teaching materials, syllabi, papers, etc.

It places us in the privileged position of having a broad overview of the state of teaching of English in Thailand—of observing and thinking about the problems, and discussing possible remedies. This paper is about some of the major problems I, and my colleagues, have observed, and some of the remedies we have advocated,

and the further problems associated with these remedies. Both problems and remedies have to do with matters of attitude and approach, and technique and style. But it must be emphasized that there is no particular sector of the educational system where language teaching is particularly better or particularly worse; there are good teachers and not-so-good teachers in every sector, in every institution, in every school and college and campus. The problems I shall mention are therefore common problems (or problems in common), and perhaps not only confined to English language teaching, but to the processes of education in general, and certainly not confined to Thailand. They are problems everyone has, or is aware of, at some time throughout their professional careers as teachers. We can all do something to remedy them.

Problem 1

Thais are well known to be happy, hospitable people who are friendly, who smile a lot, who laugh and joke, who seem to enjoy life and each others' company. However, one notes a strange metamorphosis when Thai teachers go into their classrooms. They stop smiling, laughing, joking; they often seem unhappy; at best very serious and solemn. The first problem then: *teaching English in Thailand is made too serious and solemn, and as a consequence is boring and unenjoyable, both for teachers and learners.* How is this manifested?

- **classrooms** too often tend to be 'inhospitable' places, with bare walls and empty cupboards;
- **teaching styles** too often tend to be dry and pedantic, much devoted to analyzing and explaining facts about the language rather than living it;
- **lessons** too often tend to lack variety of content and activity;
- **texts** too often tend to be dry, unstimulating pieces of prose, about nothing in particular that impinges on, or derives from, a student's real interests in life
- **students, as learners,** never seem to interact with each other, or if they do, for too short a time, only then, and trivially.

Remedy 1

First, a generalization: *the affective side to language learning (more than any other subject on the curriculum) is just as important as the cognitive (indeed some would say more important).* Learning a foreign language must be an enjoyable experience—not in any frivolous sense, but in a profound sense. It should engage the personality, it should involve the emotions, it should make people smile, and want to say something about something with a particular point of view

and, if necessary, with feeling. Classrooms should be hospitable places full of pictures and colour. The visual element in language learning tends to be overlooked in our quest for better materials and more efficient methodologies. Of course, it is a question of attitude too—attitude to education (which *is* of course a serious business). But it doesn't have to be dull. It should be *sanuk*: the spirit of enjoyment. One way; the first way, is to bring the living world into the classroom through pictures and posters, diagrams and illustrations. Indeed, anything visual to provide content and meaning.

Problem 2

English language teaching and learning is all about exposure to, and the use of, English. Just that. But *so often more Thai language is used in an English language lesson than is desirable*. Sometimes 90% of a lesson is conducted in Thai. There are many teachers of English I know who lack both the confidence and the competence to use English more than minimally. But I believe it is the case that there should be no teacher, however weak he or she thinks he or she is, who could not use English more. Too often it seems to me teachers say: my students want me to use Thai so they can understand me; and yes, there are always some matters connected with the conduct of a lesson that can be handled best in Thai. But I feel that too often, too many teachers give in too easily to students. How would it be if a geography lesson had no geography in it, or mathematics no numbers or equations or angles or theorems? So too, above all, an English lesson must be IN and ABOUT and provoke the USE of English. If it doesn't, it's not an English lesson.

Remedy 2

Use English to teach English – however difficult this may be to do (and no one said that foreign language teaching was not difficult). This requires persistence and commitment by teachers. It also requires teachers to modify their attitude to what they call mistakes. Many teachers who can speak English perfectly adequately claim they don't use English in the conduct of an English lesson because they are afraid of making mistakes. This is self-defeating. Generally speaking, the more English a student hears, the more English that student will acquire; the more English a teacher uses, the more confident he or she will become in using it. I will stress this further and say it is a teacher's *duty* to use as much English as possible in a lesson (but that doesn't mean to say the teacher should be talking all the time!). It should also be our duty as teachers to help and encourage our colleagues to use English more, both in and outside the classroom.

Problem 3

I have already touched on this problem when talking about the over-seriousness of much English teaching. *Teaching methodology throughout Thailand in all institutions at all levels is still far too teacher-centred or teacher-dominated.* I know teachers *are* important people, but so are learners! There is a basic problem one observes in visiting teachers at work: they teach too much, and learners learn too little. By this I mean that teachers do too much of the work, and learners do too little. Too little responsibility for learning appears to devolve on the learner; he/she doesn't have to struggle enough, work hard enough to use the language. Why is this? Paradoxically it is partly because teachers take themselves and their task very seriously: if they are not teaching all the time, so they think, they are not teaching properly. But one of the secrets of language teaching is getting other people to do the learning. Many teachers unfortunately lack a basic awareness of how to do this—how to stop dispensing facts and information and explanations, and how to try and get the learners to work things out for themselves, and learn through doing.

Remedy 3

Think about ways of getting the students to do more of the work, particularly oral work; of developing, in other words, a more learner-centred, learning-oriented approach to language teaching, with the teacher acting as manager, or organizer, or adviser, or guide, rather than the dispenser of facts and answers. This requires more pair and group work, and more working in pairs and working in groups, where learners learn more from each other, albeit in a structured setting, where the teacher can take a more personal interest in individuals rather than addressing the group as a whole. It involves more project work, of learners finding out for themselves, and presenting their findings. Teachers would be more successful if they dominated less and involved themselves more; if they regarded teaching less as a matter of personal performance, but more as a matter of interpersonal stage-managing, where the teacher directs but the learners perform.

Problem 4

We move now away from the classroom into the area of language teaching, and the organization of it, that has to do with WHAT is taught rather than HOW. The problem has to do with the curriculum (at all levels, in all institutions). In my view, and in the view of many colleagues, both expatriate and Thai, *the curriculum for language learning (and the syllabi and materials that flesh it out) for many sectors of the educational system is too fragmented and*

incoherent. It does not in any clear sense reflect purposes or strategies for learning. In English major programmes in Teachers' Colleges and University departments there may be up to 100 courses over 4 years of education for learners to choose from. The connections between these courses are frequently tenuous (or non-existent) both synchronically and diachronically—at any one time, and over a period of time. Reading I may be more difficult than Reading II; Speaking I has little relationship to Grammar I, or Listening I, and so on. One of the reasons for this is the relative autonomy or freedom given to language teachers to decide what to teach. But the main reason is a *lack of expectation* that courses should relate to each other in rational, coherent ways; that language learning is above all an integrated activity. It is a matter of *design*; but designs for language learning are unfortunately too often taken from subject teaching models, and 'integration' becomes something that happens by accident and incidental cooperation, rather than being purposeful and planned.

Remedy 4

This is very difficult, because of the professional bureaucracy that is involved in curriculum and syllabus design. At the very least, teachers who design and write materials for courses should teach them. But so often design is left to a committee, and handed down, officially sanctioned, and teachers are left with a sense of powerlessness to influence what they teach. There is no doubt in my mind *that important and urgent work needs to be done in many areas of the educational system on curriculum reform revision or rationalization, and teachers who feel this should get together and say so.* Just to help, here are three principles for programme design which I believe are incontrovertible:

- easier should come before more difficult
- skill subjects should come before content subjects
- oral/aural skill should be emphasized before reading/writing skills.

In this way one might avoid the situation of students studying linguistics, and transformational grammar, before they have learnt to handle successfully basic conversational exchanges in English.

Problem 5

We have talked about the curriculum, and the need for reform, and the process of teaching itself. The fifth problem I will mention has to do with standards—assessment of standards. What is actually achieved by all the hard work that is done? The problem is this: generally speaking assessment—through tests and exams—is *done in relation to what has been taught* and is internal to institutions. Two

points need to be made. One is that *current methods of assessment tend to be norm related rather than criterion referenced*. What does 70% or 90% or 40% mean? There are no tests/exams that I know of in Thailand that describe what skills a student has developed so we can say what he/she can *do*. The other point is this: no externally verifiable standards of evaluation are applied within the educational system in Thailand. Yes, people take TOEFL if they want to go to America, or ELTS if they want to go to Britain. But it is impossible to judge what level of proficiency a Mathayom 6 student, for example, has reached, or a teacher trainee who has followed a 4 year teacher training course, because they do not take an exam which, if a student passes it, enables us to judge their level of proficiency by some international standard.

Remedy 5

Submit students to an external exam such as the Cambridge University Preliminary English Test (PET), or First Certificate Exam (FCE), or Royal Society of Arts (RSA) exams. This of course is a very 'political' suggestion, because such exams carry with them implications for certain kinds of teaching. But looked at another way, so colossal is the time and energy and money devoted to English teaching in Thailand that surely the return on the investment justifies some marker of comparability with students who take these exams in other countries, at least so educators in Thailand know where the teaching of English stands on an international scale.

I have outlined what I see as five major problems for the teaching and learning of English in Thailand, and some possible ways of remedying these problems. Let me summarize them:

Problem 1 : English language teaching is too often a dull and boring experience.

Remedy 1 : make learning enjoyable; above all, emphasize the visual element in language learning, in classrooms and materials.

Problem 2 : too much Thai is used in the English class

Remedy 2 : use English to teach English

Problem 3 : classroom teaching is still too teacher-dominated

Remedy 3 : encourage more individual, pair and group learning, with the teacher as manager

Problem 4 : the curriculum in some sectors is too fragmented and incoherent

Remedy 4 : reform or rationalize the curriculum

Problem 5 : there are no externally verifiable standards of achievement

Remedy 5 : use internationally recognized exams to assess proficiency, eg. Cambridge PET, FCE, etc.

Of course, each of the remedies to the problems I have outlined presents a problem—or series of problems—to implement. Take REMEDY 1, for example: making a classroom an attractive and stimulating place to be in requires a lot of time and energy on the part of teachers and students collecting pictures and posters and displaying them. It requires imagination and resourcefulness; it requires persuasiveness and determination; and it may require spending some money. And such an improvement *by itself* does not guarantee that teaching and learning ceases to be dull and boring, and becomes interesting and enjoyable. There are a lot more complex psychological factors involved, factors that have to do with a teachers' personality, and attitudes to language and communication, to teaching and learning, and indeed attitudes to life and other human beings.

But promoting a greater visual element in language teaching does emphasize a particular point about language learning: there has to be meaning and content, there has to be something *to talk about other than language itself*, and this, pictures (diagrams, illustrations, film strips, cartoons, photographs, video, newspapers, etc.) can provide. Put simply, if there is more interesting content in language learning, then the experience potentially becomes more interesting and enjoyable, because the experience ceases to be centred on language itself, but on what language is used for in life. English becomes a means rather than an end. Too often, it seems, one notes that unfortunate tendency in many countries for educational systems—schools, colleges and even universities—to exclude life from the classroom, particularly the affective side of life—the emotions, feelings, the sense of enjoyment and pleasure. But we cannot, in my opinion, learn anything properly without bringing this side of things in. And the more we do it, the more successful we shall be as language teachers and educators.

Secondly, let me turn attention now to REMEDY 3. A very important part of teaching is about *control*—physical control of a group of individuals, and intellectual control of the learning process. The teacher's traditional dominating position at the front of the class, facing orderly rows of students, reflects very closely the traditional role of the teacher as the dispenser of facts and information which students acquire, or internalize, or 'learn', often by rote. Physical dominance or control reflects intellectual dominance or control. It is not the case that this is necessarily wrong or bad: the teacher *is* older, more experienced, has been educated and trained, and 'knows' (or is assumed to 'know') what he or she is teaching, which is by definition what students in their role as students don't know—why they are there and being subject to the process. But it must be counted as wrong or bad if this is the *only* physical disposition and role relationship that is allowed to exist in an English language lesson. Unfortunately, many teachers do find it extraordinarily difficult to relax or relinquish what they consider to be their

dominance of the process—to move away from the front of the class, to put students in groups, to set up an activity and monitor how it proceeds without unduly intervening, to set up conditions for more independent learning, rather than direct expository teaching. The reason for this I believe is that such a transfer or devolution of control in the sense of *responsibility*—but not control in the sense of *authority*—involves the unpredictable; it involves taking risks, and the possibility of failure or chaos if things go wrong. But it is precisely what needs to happen if genuine communicative learning is to take place, because genuine communicative learning is all about coping with the unpredictable, taking risks, and not being afraid of failure. Learners learn how to use language by being placed in situations independently where language use is required. And for this to happen the teacher needs to adopt a different role, variously described as manager or monitor, on the organizational side, or counsellor or consultant or resource person, on the pedagogic side.

The basic problem is that teachers are not trained to do this from the outset. They can be led to it by observing others making it happen, and allowing themselves to be observed and guided. But language teaching is an intensely private affair, so the opportunities for this are limited. Why are teachers so sensitive about being observed teaching? Encouraging people to interact through a foreign language—to communicate in a non-usual way—touches on several raw nerves in the human psyche both for teacher and learner. Learners are frequently shy, nervous, uncertain, afraid to make mistakes. Effective language teaching requires teachers to expose and exhibit personal qualities that render them vulnerable to criticism, even laughter. So teaching becomes an activity or experience that is seldom shared. Fear of failure makes experimentation a risky business not only because much of a teacher's personality is invested in it, but also because with failure may come loss of authority, or face. Hence, there is a reluctance to move away from traditional roles and stances, to stick with approaches and techniques that least threaten their personalities, or expose them to the risk of failure. What we all have to do, it seems to me, is to think of ways, and try out ways, of getting away from this essentially negative state of affairs, to develop a more positive attitude to experimentation.

No one would ever claim that teaching is easy, and foreign language teaching is probably the hardest kind of teaching there is. However :

- **As educators** we should recognize that the affective side to language learning is as important as the cognitive;
- **As professionals** we should encourage more positive sharing and cooperation with each other, and observation of each other;
- **As teachers** we should strive to create more interesting, meaningful, and hospitable teaching environments within which students can learn, more interesting and lively materials for them to learn from;

- **And as educators, professionals, teachers and individuals** we should strive to learn more about how the learning process happens, and how it can be facilitated.

All of the remedies I have suggested are hard to implement. But some of them need to happen sooner rather than later if the learning of English in Thailand is going to improve—as I believe it urgently needs to do, and deserves to do.

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