
Research

CULI ESL Teachers--Researchers at Work

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In its Fifth Educational Development Plan, CULI (Chulalongkorn University Language Institute) has set as its research focus the development of teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. The objectives of research are as follow : (1) to improve the quality of the teaching and learning of English which CULI provides to every faculty of Chulalongkorn University and to personnel from government agencies, government enterprises and private companies, (2) to improve the research competence and the skills of CULI teachers, and (3) to support and encourage the research work that is relevant to the University's policy, and that meets the needs of the community.

CULI has produced quite a lot of language teachers with several research skills, language teachers whose research is of the highest standard, and these teachers have successfully headed a number of research projects which are of benefit to the teaching and learning of English. CULI has undertaken research in the field of teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in order to help improve language at all levels and to assist each individual in the pursuit of his own career.

Such valuable research helps the ESL teachers to know their students' academic problems, their educational needs, interests and attitudes in learning English as a second language. Research also gives teachers the opportunity to know how to improve the materials used in teaching, how to construct various kinds of tests to assess learning, and above all how to evaluate the success of the courses taught.

ESL teachers should know their students. There has been quite a lot of research done regarding first year students at Chulalongkorn University. Silpa-Anan (1978) found that almost all students had the same kinds of problems on English tests, especially in grammatical structure usage, in vocabulary and in listening. Teerawong (1982) confirmed that students' writing proficiency was low and they had numerous problems in sentence arrangement and punctuation usage.

CULI has improved the materials to be used with the students according to the students' needs. More exercises in needed subjects have been added as a result of research. Research has also been done in other areas such as listening skills in order to confirm any problems suspected. Nimmannit (1983) has tried different methods of teaching listening to first year students. She found that the method that would be of the most benefit improving her students' listening skill was exposing them to two hours a week of teaching both listening and speaking skills for the first half of the semester. For the second half, students would be placed in a lab for two hours a week for self-instruction. The results of Nimmannit's research prompted CULI to begin a similar plan of instruction and it was found that students tended to want to come to the language lab during their free time.

In a similar research project, Niyomhet (1984) found that most of her students felt that a self-study program, according to individual pace most suited them. She, however, learned that most below average students strongly preferred a more directed teaching style. Niyomhet, therefore, strongly recommended that directed teaching be offered in the Faculty of Education, where most of the below-average students are to be found, while a combination of directed teaching and individualized self-study be offered to the students of other faculties.

In a separate study, Sukamolson (1983) found that the majority of students liked the individualized learning approach. About 32% of them preferred to learn English by the above mentioned approach with some directed teaching at least an hour per week. More male students preferred the approach than did females. Likewise, above average students liked the approach more than did the below average ones. It was suggested by the students that individualized language learning approach be used for teaching above average students and that at least an hour of directed teaching be added to the approach for average and poor students.

Thammongkol (1979), however, found that those who gained more from the self-study reading course tended to be the poor and good students, whereas the average and excellent students apparently did not gain as much. However, some students seemed not to fully understand their responsibilities in the self-study program. This approach which took into account individual differences also imposed a great administration burden on the teachers and individualized instruction at CULI was discontinued after one year. Wongsotorn (1979) similarly discovered that the problem encountered by the Language Institute arose from unfamiliarity of both teachers and students with the individualized mode of instruction. Time must be allowed for students and teachers to adjust themselves to this new learning approach.

Niyomhet (1984), Sukamolson (1983) and Thammongkol (1979)'s research all demonstrated an individualized learning approach would not be able to fit every student's capability, and that different teaching and learning methods should be

considered. The era of communicative approach has done much to take into consideration both the students' needs and their individualized learning styles. CULI teachers were left free to give as much directed teaching as they felt necessary as well as to leave time for individualized, pair or group work.

In a separate study on reading topics, Prapphal (1983) found that the topic of high interest falls into two main categories; firstly topics of common interest, namely travel, short stories, and comic strips, wonders of the world, interesting traditions and current events, and secondly topics of specific interest to students in particular discipline-related faculties. The Foundation English I and II textbooks for first year students at Chulalongkorn University have tried to incorporate reading topics of common interest, whereas EAP I and II (English for Academic Purposes) for second year students cover the topics of specific interest to the different faculties where they are taught.

Research has also been done regarding students at different grade levels at Chulalongkorn University and has proved invaluable in helping the teachers to evaluate course scheduling and materials. Wongsotorn (1981)'s research on CULI's EAP Writing courses found that while half of the instructors felt that 3 hours per week of class time were adequate, the remaining half preferred 4 hours. She also found that the majority of the students consulted each other more than their instructor when they ran into problems. Wongsotorn also found that the students' greatest amount of improvement was in the area of expression of ideas. Taking this research into consideration, CULI has increased the EAP class time by one hour and introduced more pair work and group work in the EAP materials. The use of pair and group work activities encourage the students' natural inclination to be peer-tutors.

Additional research projects that aided CULI to assess the success of coursework and materials include Savangvarorose (1980)'s research on cloze testing with science students, Campiranonta (1981)'s research on advanced English for Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy students, and Thammongkol (1982)'s research on the English critical reading ability of pregraduate students.

Thammongkol (1982) analyzed her students' critical reading ability after constructing and administering a standardized English Critical Reading Test. Her study revealed that the majority of undergraduate students in their junior and senior years lacked adequate critical reading skills but that they tended to be strong in distinguishing between fact and opinion. She also learned that the students' English critical reading test scores correlated better with their overall GPA scores which represented their scholastic ability than their English GPA scores. Thammongkol confirmed that critical reading is indeed a cognitive process.

Some CULI teachers have tried to use technology to help them teach English as a second language. Chaopricha (1983) confirmed that microcomputers would be a great help in teaching the reading of English to Chulalongkorn University students. Savangvarorose (1985) used video in teaching English to Chulalongkorn University students but she learned that although the use of video appeared to be of great help, it was not cost effective. She also proposed that the level of language used in the video be seriously examined before introducing the video in class. Although this research showed that video and micro-computers could be beneficial, CULI still could not afford the cost of such technology for every teacher. Therefore, CULI teachers have had to look to other alternatives to help them teach English efficiently.

CULI teachers have also done interesting research concerning language centers. Sukamolson (1980) did a survey study of language centers on five continents. His survey's purpose was to follow up and expand on Grauberg's 1971 study on university language centers in Europe, to find out about the status, structures, and roles of language centers in Asia, Europe, America, and Africa and to establish types of language centers according to their roles, structures and status. Questionnaires were sent to 307 language centers in 5 continents with a return of approximately 48%. Sukamolson found that the main objectives of the language centers all over the world were: to teach languages, to conduct applied and basic language research and to give services in training and seminars, conferences and symposiums on language learning, research, and linguistics. Interestingly, the majority of both autonomous and affiliated centers wished to keep their original status.

CULI's own responsibility toward its language centers can be divided into 4 parts: (1) the provision of English language courses for students of 15 faculties, (2) the preparation of instructional materials for all of the courses offered by CULI, (3) the promotion of research in Applied Linguistics and English language teaching and (4) an undertaking passed on from CIEL (Central Institute of English Language) which is the responsibility as a National Coordinator for English teaching in Thai universities. These general objectives also agree with the aims and goals of other language centers studied by Sukamolson.

Conferences, seminars and symposiums offer teachers valuable insights into teaching strategies, materials available and problems encountered by fellow teachers. Research has been done by CULI instructors to assess teachers' opinions and needs regarding such conferences.

Sakarik (1980) did a survey of the opinions of various teachers concerning the SEAMEO Regional Language Center (RELC) in Singapore. Former participants thought that the courses offered were both useful and relevant to their work and agreed with the RELC National Co-ordinators in Thailand that a regional seminar

should be held once a year. The themes of such seminars should revolve around language teaching and psycholinguistics. In addition, advanced courses should be held twice a year and they should be four months in length. Wongsotorn (1985) did a survey concerning SEAMEO's long term project (1987-1991) in respect to the needs of Thailand. She concluded that SEAMEO should provide more short courses and provide research funds for any topics concerning English language teaching in the SEAMEO members' countries.

There has also been research done on societal needs for using English. Wongsotorn (1981) found that government agencies and state enterprises used English moderately, whereas business sectors used more English. Reading and writing ranked first and second for both sectors. It was additionally found that English was used more for working purposes than for social and personal purposes, and that most of the personnel improved their English by self-instruction.

CULI teachers well realize the importance of research both to the development of education as a whole, and to the improvement of the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in particular. The research summarized in this paper shows the importance of such work and the gratitude that CULI feels toward the contributors of such valuable research.

Note

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