

TEFL Wonderland : The ‘งููู งููู plaa plaa’ Philosophy of Teaching English

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“กระทรวงศึกษาธิการทำงานเกี่ยวกับภาษาอังกฤษได้ผลเสียมานานแล้ว เด็กไทยจึงกลายเป็นประชากรไทยมีความรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ งู ๆ ปลา ๆ เกือบทั่วประเทศ... ถ้าวันใดมีอำนาจบัญชางานก็เห็นจะต้องรื้อสต็อกหรือเลหลังทำป้ายใหม่และชุดหลุมฝังเสาใหม่กันทั้งหมด !”

ส. ธรรมยศ (2509 : 66)

“เราทราบกันมานานแล้วว่าครูที่สอนภาษาอังกฤษในโรงเรียนประถมทั่วประเทศรู้ภาษาอังกฤษไม่พอที่จะสอนให้ถูกต้อง... แต่เราก็พอใจกันที่จะให้นักเรียนเรียนอย่างไม่ถูกต้อง เพราะเราคิดกันว่าในจำนวนนักเรียนหนึ่งแสนคน ถ้ามีนักเรียนร้อยคนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษขึ้นมาได้อย่าง งู ๆ ปลา ๆ ก็จะได้ดีกว่าไม่มีนักเรียนที่รู้ภาษาอังกฤษเลย เรามีปรัชญา งู ๆ ปลา ๆ เราเชื่อในเรื่องความรู้ งู ๆ ปลา ๆ ... เพราะฉะนั้นสิ่งที่ควรกระทำคือ พิจารณาว่าเราสอนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อประโยชน์อันใด... ถ้าเราคิดว่าการมีความรู้ งู ๆ ปลา ๆ เป็นของดี เราก็ไม่จำเป็นต้องเคียดแค้นในเรื่องใดทั้งนั้น เพราะเรารู้ความจริงแค้นมานานแล้ว”

ม.ล. บุญเหลือ เทพยสุวรรณ (2513 : 19–20)

In accepting an invitation to write an article in memory of M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvann, I have been led by my lasting desire to clear the air and bridge the generation gap between myth and reality of English language teaching in Thailand. This issue was one of the major concerns in M.L. Boonlua's life. I agree whole-

heartedly with the above quotations from S. Dhammayos and M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn concerning our 'ηuu ηuu plaa plaa' (smattering) philosophy of English language learning and teaching. I submit that we do something about it--the sooner the better!

Indeed, the current scene in the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Thailand is not unlike that of our total educational system. We seem to be characterized by confusion, fragmentation, lack of direction, and uncertainty. These are the feelings you and I have in common with regard to education in 'general and TEFL in particular. We flit from one TEFL fad to another. We are lost, but we simply shrug it off with a smile--saying 'mai pen rai' (It doesn't really matter!)

At this point a word about our 'mai pen rai' attitude is perhaps in order. Is it really not 'mai pen rai' even if hundreds of thousands of students in Prathom (Grades) 5 and 6 have to waste their time on the poor instruction of English? What a wonder! Has fate decided so for Thai children?

I don't want to go on and on complaining about education and TEFL in this country. We have, during the past twenty years or so, confused myths with realities (พระพาศน์ พุทธิพงษ์ 2522). At this point, I invite you to ponder over M.L. Boonlua's words :

...If English is regarded as an indispensable step to higher education (or any level of education for that matter), to better jobs in business, to advanced research, it should be taken seriously (emphasized mine).

Except, perhaps, nothing can or should be taken seriously in the Land of Smiles (Debyasuvarn 1970 : 64-65).

To begin with, let's take English at the primary level as a case in point. The current resurgence of English in our primary schools has generated a renewed interest in TEFL. Despite the disappointment of many language educators, the politico-social forces that support the teaching of English have already gained a foothold.

With the advent of the curriculum of B.E. 2521, there is a new agenda facing TEFL at the primary level. According to the Ministry of Education (Order 154/2523), either English or a group of life experience subjects should be added as an optional EXTRA in the new curriculum. In my opinion, the tale of the blind men and the elephant has some relevance for TEFL in this country. I think it is quite easy to view the school programmes from an 'either/or' perspective and say : a choice between English and the so-called life experience subjects (like gardening and wood-working) in Prathom 5 and 6 must be made in the academic year 2525. Obviously, a choice as such will not make English truly optional because its

counterpart is not a real challenging alternative. The competition between such a prestigious candidate as English and a low status rival like vocationally oriented subjects is indeed unfortunate!

I am with John Dewey who was strongly against any irreconcilable dualisms which force us to choose either one or the other. To my mind, the tug of war between English and gardening (if you will) in the primary curriculum is untenable. In fact, it is quite obvious that 90 per cent (or perhaps more) of the schools (not the students) will opt for English. Why, in the first place, do we have to set up such an 'either/or' policy between a pair of incompatible subjects?

Now then, suppose every school decided to teach English in Prathom 5 and 6, what shall we do? What provision shall we make for the success of TEFL? Of course I am knowledgeable that a committee has been formed for the preparation of coursebooks and teacher's manuals, including a statement indicates that no school would choose to teach English until its teachers had undergone a 3-day-training programme! So it seems that our TEFL at the primary level is very well-grounded. But I doubt whether we will succeed (cf. Debyasuvarn 1981). Although some instant experts claim that a teacher's manual is the best solution to the problem, I can't afford not to be somewhat pessimistic!

Taking everything into consideration, I feel that our TEFL pendulum has swung back to the 'coursebook-cum-teacher's manual' panacea! This only reminds me of our past experience with the Burrow's Oxford English Course for Thailand and its comprehensive Teacher's Notes. Unfortunately, it was one of our mistaken approaches to TEFL -- i.e. the fallacy of relying too heavily on a teacher's manual! And we are now doing just that, not only for English but also for every subject in the curriculum. The Department of Educational Techniques, Ministry of Education, has currently states that no coursebook would be approved without its teacher's manual. Is this a guarantee for our success? With the highest degree of optimism, I still wonder about that!

I have so far argued about English without saying a word concerning its counterpart in the primary curriculum. Perhaps mention should be made in passing at this point that our administrators and policy-makers are currently afraid that their poor planning in terms of 'either/or' type of choice between English and the life experience subjects will lead to a paradox in primary schooling. As I have already stated earlier a few schools will choose the latter; while most schools will select the former -- in spite of their unqualified teachers! Oddly enough, whichever the case may be is indeed against the actual will of Thai educational leaders. What they really want to see is that the choice between the two subjects would be more or less on a par.

At this point it is perhaps in order to talk about the solution to our problems. From time to time, some concerned specialists have made recommendations on the improvement of TEFL in Thailand (cf. Debyasuvarn, Sukwiwat, and Noss 1971 ; Brudhiprabha 1975). The major ones are these :

First and foremost, that an explicit statement of EFL policy and realistic goals of TEFL be established. (I am going to say a few words about this in the end).

Secondly, that the minimum academic qualification for EFL instruction be stated and that nationwide ways and means be found to evaluate EFL teachers periodically for their proficiency in English as well as professional competence. The importance of qualified teachers in their subject matter and methodology is probably most viable (cf. Debyasuvarn 1970, 1981). Indeed, it's high time we set some guidelines for the preparation of EFL teachers in this country.*

Thirdly, that a moratorium be declared on TEFL in Thailand. In other words, that no school be permitted to teach English until its teachers have both the proficiency and/or the required training in TEFL.

Last but not least, that the teaching of Thai be completely overhauled for the simple fact that those who cannot use their own native language well will do no better in a foreign tongue!

Finally, it brings me to the next observation that I would like to make here because little attention seems to have been paid to it in this country, i.e. the question of educational language policy. The teaching of English as a foreign or second and even native language is influenced by the overall policy that a given country formulates. Viewed from the language policy perspective, four separate variables are involved, namely -- students, teachers, courses, and communities (Aksornkool 1980; Judd 1978). Take situations where English is taught as a foreign language like in Indonesia, Japan or Thailand for example, we would expect this factor to influence student, teacher, course, and community variables in a certain way -- depending on language policy decisions of their respective countries. Unfortunately, as I have discussed elsewhere (Brudhiprabha 1976, 1980), language policy in general and EFL policy in particular has been taken for granted in Thailand. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

* As a matter of fact, I have made a number of recommendations in this direction time and time again. Unfortunately, in this country there is a big gap between the educational leaders and the specialists. The twain have rarely met. Now that we have our professional organization, i.e. Thai/TESOL, perhaps the time is ripe for us to rock the boat! May I suggest that Thai/TESOL serve as a kind of liaison between the profession and the powers that be!

I have said enough, I hope, to demonstrate that there seems to be some misadventures in our TEFL wonderland in terms of its philosophy, policy and preparation at the primary level (or any other levels for that matter). In short, the moral of all this is : the ‘หฺูอ หฺูอ ปฺลาา ปฺลาา’ philosophy of learning and teaching English is a pure wastage in foreign language education! The shilly-shally and the wishy-washy preparation lead us nowhere!

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