

# Some Directions in the Teaching of English in Thai University and Their Implications for Staff Development

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Too often in English language teaching one is reminded of the French dictum '*plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*' as fashion succeeds fashion and 'new' approaches are seized upon as a solution for all problems only to be later abandoned for a yet newer approach without any qualitative improvement having been achieved in students' ability to use what they have been taught.

A fashion currently in vogue is for special purpose English courses. Many university English departments offer a range of so-called ESP courses in the hope that they will better meet the needs of students than more general courses.

This is a laudable objective but simply to confine the context of an English course to that of the student's main area of study does not in itself guarantee a high degree of student motivation. Nor does it guarantee a qualitative improvement in what is taught and learned. Perhaps the time has come, before we are overtaken by yet another fashion, to consider what the benefits of ESP courses are to the student and what the relationship is between ESP and general English courses.

If a student really needs English for his specialised course of study at university, whether it be in the field of Medicine or Fine Arts, then it certainly makes sense to base an English course on the type of language and particular skills that he has to cope with. However, I think that very often actual student needs are confused with what educators consider to be desirable abilities.

It may be, perhaps, that the vast majority of students will not need English until after graduating when they are applying for jobs or considering post-graduate studies. If this assumption is true, the student probably only sees the purpose of studying English when he is in his third or fourth year at University and it is at this stage, when the student recognises a special need for English, that ESP courses are likely to be relevant and effective.

Rather than providing highly specific courses too early in the student's university career, I think that we should concentrate on developing courses of a more general nature designed to give the student confidence in his ability to communicate in the spoken language and to understand what he reads. Such courses would provide a necessary foundation for any future specialisation.

Certain principles of course design should be applied both to general and ESP courses, and I think it is worth considering these principles in some detail.

**1. Course design – reading courses.** The first decision that needs to be taken is whether the course will concentrate on teaching and developing reading skills or whether it will concentrate on teaching students to understand specific texts.

If each unit of a course deals with a specific text there is a danger that the text becomes merely a vehicle for teaching new language – the vocabulary and structures contained in the text – and students come to regard the text as an end in itself, something to be understood (often with the help of translation glosses) so that questions on the text can be answered successfully in a final examination. If a course is designed in this way it is quite likely that it may do nothing to improve students' ability to read English, that is to read texts that have not been exhaustively "taught" in class. A course that is more likely to effectively develop reading skills should be so designed that the emphasis is on increasing students' vocabulary, improving ability to analyse and understand sentence structure and developing the ability to deduce the meanings of words and phrases from context. The knowledge and abilities gained from specific exercises can then be practised in a range of different tests made available in the form of a course library or reading laboratory. At the end of such a course, students would be tested on their ability to understand texts that they had not seen before. Until we break away from text-based reading courses, I don't think we shall succeed in doing much to improve students' ability to read in English.

The second most important aspect of the design of a reading course concerns the role of the teacher in the reading class. In the case of all too many materials the teacher merely provides 'a voice' to guide the class through exercises and texts that each student has in front of him, often set out with instructions and explanations more appropriate to a self study mode of learning. When designing a course it is essential to consider the role that the teacher is to play at each stage in a unit so that the teacher provides necessary elements of information and practice that are not otherwise available to the student. If the dynamic element of a teacher-presented course (as opposed to a self-study course) is not taken into account, the reading class will be doomed from the outset.

**2. Course design – spoken English courses.** Although reading courses are the main concern in many institutions, students are often heard to say that what they are most interested in is being able to speak English and it is in this area of developing students' ability to communicate in spoken language that we are probably least successful in institution-based language teaching programmes.

A course designed to develop communicative ability in spoken English would, I think, need to take the following factors into account :

- Students should have the opportunity to use English to exchange information.
- This would involve an organization of language according to 'use' rather than 'form'
- It would also involve an organization of classroom procedures that would enable students to work in pairs or small groups not under the direct control of the teacher.
- For this to be possible there would have to be careful preparation and presentation by the teacher of the language needed by the students.
- It would also be important for the students to acquire a framework for relating experiences in using language for communication. This would involve a formal structuring of the course so that 'use' can be understood as an application of 'form'.

**3. Course design – ESP courses.** Although it may be possible to predict the future needs for English within a student's area of specialisation the student himself will only acknowledge a need when faced with a particular task that necessitates the use of English. It is only then that learning English within a specialised context and developing specialised skills (such as summarising or report writing or skimming a text for information) are likely to be meaningful and therefore to stimulate motivation for learning. It is at this time that a student will need to draw on his general communicative ability in English and to use this as a basis for developing skills in specialised areas. If there is nothing to draw on frustration rather than motivation will be the likely outcome.

The principles of course design are the same for general as for specialised courses. ESP is not in any way a new approach to language teaching it simply relates to the selection of language, context and skills covered by a particular course. Unless successful teaching and learning have been demonstrated within the context of general communicative skills in English there is no reason to suppose that any more success will be achieved within a specific context.

The implications of this position for staff development programmes are that the first priority should be the improvement of the teaching of general courses so that these provide the student with a basis for developing specialised areas of language use. This involves specifying to a far greater degree than is done in current practice the level of ability a student should reach at the end of a course.

With regard to reading courses research is needed in the areas of teaching vocabulary, measuring a student's active and passive vocabulary, determining acceptable levels of difficulty, length and topics covered in reading texts and teaching procedures that will encourage the maximum degree of interaction between teacher, student and teaching materials in the reading class.

For courses that attempt to develop communicative ability in spoken English, well-designed materials are not sufficient in themselves. What is equally necessary is careful preparation of teachers to understand fully the pedagogical implications of the materials and procedures used and practice and training in adjusting to what might be an unfamiliar role in the classroom. *Teachers might well also need help in developing confidence in their own use of English to enable them to undertake a new role successfully.* A course can only be considered well designed if it can be well taught.

*Even greater emphasis should be placed in staff development programmes on the training of teachers who are going to teach ESP courses.* There can be few things more demoralising for a teacher than having to teach a text that he doesn't understand himself. Yet this is a far from uncommon situation with ESP courses. Adequate preparation for teaching a special purpose course must include detailed and authoritative explanations of the subject content. This can only be achieved by co-operation between teachers of the specialist subject and English language teachers. Within a university context this is a perfectly feasible proposition but planned provision for this necessary degree of co-operation remains the exception rather than the rule in most institutions.

A final observation is that staff development is of necessity an on-going process. It is important throughout one's teaching career not just at the beginning. This is especially so in the field of second language teaching which has shown itself too often to be susceptible to change for the sake of change with little or no cumulative and qualitative improvement.