

## English for the Liberal Arts in Thailand

Ted Goldenberg  
Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University

In this discussion, aims include (1) development of a philosophical foundation for English for the Liberal Arts in Thailand, (2) identification of the basic approach or methodology of English for the Liberal Arts; and (3) description of some efforts in the Faculty of Arts of Silpakorn University which may lead to the realization of the ideals of (1) and (2).

### The Philosophy

The liberal arts, like society and learning, constantly change, and education in the liberal arts reflects these changes. University faculties frequently or constantly review developments in the liberal arts along with social developments relevant and valuable for university learners.<sup>1</sup> In modern times liberal undergraduate education may embrace not only the traditional disciplines of the humanities but many of the new social sciences and basic elements of the natural sciences. And in terms of content and selection of disciplines, liberal education may vary considerably among universities, including government universities within a single country such as Thailand<sup>2</sup> Even in a small faculty of arts such as ours at Silpakorn University, variety of courses are plentiful so that every student may achieve a unique education, in terms of teachers and material studied. In this respect, a modern liberal arts education is not easy to define.<sup>3</sup>

Courses and content represent only the superficial curriculum. The real, important curriculum of the liberal arts may be designated, simply, character-building.<sup>4</sup> The real (but seldom stated) curriculum of the liberal arts, whether focussed on just the humanities or including the sciences, consists of learning how to learn, learning how to love and learning how to be free.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than discuss at length these wonderful and probably acceptable objectives, let me just say that inquiry and self-realization are the cornerstones of the liberal arts curriculum.<sup>6</sup> Enlightenment is sought by raising problems and creating approaches to solutions. In the process, though much knowledge may be gained about the world, even more valuable information is obtained about one's needs and interests, the worldly and abstract values to which one is drawn and how these

values relate to one's self.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the undergraduate gets only a start in inquiry, problem-solving and self-realization processes as a student. There is no end and learning may become more difficult as problems of life become more complex with increasing involvement and responsibility in the society.

We could go on and on about the liberal undergraduate education but what in the place of English here? If it is to be a subject in the liberal arts curriculum, like all the other subjects, English must conform and contribute to the objectives and philosophy of the liberal arts curriculum, and in every respect.

I claim that, in Thai university liberal arts programs, the English courses must be concerned with learning how to learn, learning how to love, and learning how to be free, or, with inquiry and self-realization. Secondly, the English courses must focus mostly on the subject matter of the humanities, and to some extent on the social sciences, with occasional attention to the natural sciences, according to the curriculum in each faculty. To be simplistic, use of English to build character which also is English focussed on the humanities is English for the liberal arts and a liberal education.

In contrast, English courses which are structure-oriented or where the content does not reflect the humanities, do not belong in liberal arts programs. The obvious example is most freshman courses as presently taught in faculties of arts or humanities. I believe they are wasteful and unnecessary. They are aimed at structure review, or teachers use structure-oriented texts or texts designed to orient foreign immigrants to work or education in England or America.

There is support for the position that all English learning should be content-oriented, values-centered or at least concerned about personal relationships and conflict resolution.<sup>8</sup> It is my contention that Thai university English for the liberal arts should be oriented to character-building more than skill-building and to the humanities curriculum rather than, at most, to learning about foreign customs.

New Thai university students have just completed at least two years of intensive structure review and reading comprehension practice, in preparation for exams. More of the same kind of work is just more high school English. Now, university students may benefit from occasional reminders about structural problems, and of course individual problems with structure require attention. But university students who, at great expense to Thai taxpayers, are supposed to acquire a university education, should pursue the most advanced subjects and the highest possible standards. Even our Sitpakorn students with less motivation and far less ability in memorizing than freshmen in more prestigious universities are prepared well enough to begin to learn how to learn university subjects in English.

Notice that I recognize that these students are beginners, with respect to English for the liberal arts. I would not have them take philosophy or psychology

courses in English. At first, as freshmen, they may be able to handle only carefully – selected and brief passages about psychology or philosophy and other subjects of the arts curriculum, in English. It may be more appropriate to select fiction and articles from popular works, not academic journals, for study of social values and relationship, and for self-awareness.

As they progress in using English to learn they should encounter English courses oriented to particular disciplines in the liberal arts, such as “Readings in Philosophy,” “Readings in Linguistics,” or “American Drama.” Indeed where advanced English in arts or humanities faculties are mostly courses about English literature, it may be that English majors are too specialized and are not acquiring a liberal education. After all, the study of literature is only one part of education in the humanities. History, philosophy and comparative religion (and the social sciences) are just as important with respect to the objectives of a liberal education. On the other hand, the objectives may be realized with concentration on any one of these fields, and the practice has been for students to choose one of them as a major or minor. But if faculties want to develop their English programs to complement the whole curriculum, and to serve the whole person, English courses should become directed specifically to all the other disciplines in the curriculum, and at least offered as options for students to pursue.

The question then arises, “How far do we carry students into the various disciplines in our English courses for Thai university students?” This is an issue to resolve by consideration of methodology.

### **The Method**

Nothing startling is offered in this section. I want to advance the claims that the primary method for English for the liberal arts is simply use of English, and that English language and only English language should be used in English courses of the liberal arts curriculum. This has bearing on the question posed above. But first, we should discuss the claims just now summarized.

Because learning should be life-long, the liberal arts curriculum, *minimally*, should be organized to help people learn how to learn about self and life. The basic skills for university learning do not involve knowledge about geography or literature, but knowing how to learn geography or literature, and how to relate information and ideas in these disciplines to one’s own values and interests. In dealing with ideas from philosophy, religion and history and with information from the arts and the sciences, the important goal for learners is method. As one philosopher of education wrote, “Maturity comes when one has learned both the necessary competencies *and* the necessity of moving on one’s own, beyond the range of competence.”<sup>9</sup> When fundamental methods of learning are mastered the learner is prepared for anything.

And it is methodology which provides the rationale for distributing the liberal arts curriculum among academic departments.

After all, the fundamental reasons for having Thai courses and English courses and philosophy courses and history courses and economics courses or any courses are the same: broad development of analytic and creative abilities, understanding of social relationships and ability to apply knowledge of self and one's values to learning about events, situations and professional skills. If the fundamental goals are the same, why should there exist different departments in faculties of arts? Why must we have ten or fifteen divisions among personnel and course types in a faculty where basic objectives are very similar? For differences in content? Perhaps. But the structure and functioning of society is important content for both history and the social sciences. Social values and relationships are very important subjects for philosophy, religion and the literature of all languages. I do not believe that, in the humanities, content areas are different enough to justify separating faculty members and sets of courses, although we can always find or develop differences between any two departments with respect to subject matter.

Far more important as reasons to separate subjects are differences in methodologies or approaches in learning. One may argue that there are many similarities in learning all subjects: scientific method and logic; and similar use of language - in books, lectures, reports and examinations. But each discipline has its own specific approach to learning and often these are very fundamental differences.

Now it is easy to conclude that what distinguishes English courses from all other courses in the curriculum is use of English. Where other courses may use English occasionally or not at all in learning, English courses require the use of English for every aspect of learning (except, for most learners, in reflection), and all the time.

But there may always exist a wide gap between theory and practice. Though teachers may agree that use of English is the most important methodology with respect to English courses in the liberal arts or English for the liberal arts, in class teachers become impatient with the method, or with imperfect communication, and often revert to Thai. And they may rationalize that, after all, the liberal arts are to promote and express ideas about life - values, relationships, behavior and so on - ideas are the most important objective of the liberal arts curriculum.

I disagree. It is more important to learn *how* to formulate, express and operationalize (make manifest) ideas than just to have this or that particular idea about a subject. But there are many methodologies of developing ideas in the liberal arts curriculum and the responsibility of the English courses and teachers is to demonstrate how to *use English* in formulating, expressing or otherwise translating ideas into behavior. When there is misunderstanding or difficulty in expressing an

idea, there is the golden opportunity for the teacher to show how English can be used creatively to solve problems about a subject or idea.

If one now accepts use of English as the "primary methodology" one ought to ask what *is* use of English as a method. Students with at least eight years of studying English already know how to use English. What does an English teacher do to promote or improve use of English in learning literature, religion, geography or the various skills in the liberal arts curriculum?"

The most important function of the teacher is to select original material for reading analysis appropriate to student interest and objectives of the curriculum. Then the teacher may organize problems, questions, assignments and other aids for student learning through reflection and expression (and, one should add, frequent references to dictionaries).

The teacher constantly has to assess and formulate specific cognitive and affective objectives for each course. Just because English courses are oriented to the content of the humanities and the social sciences, it does not mean that there need not be specific objectives with regard to mastery of both skills and content. Performance objectives may be established along the lines of Valette and Disick with respect to use of the language,<sup>10</sup> and according to Bloom's taxonomy with respect to content.<sup>11</sup>

The reason I am concerned about behavioral objectives or mastery learning principles in the humanities, where learning is so individualistic and oriented to values, including controversial values and ideas about which there may be no social consensus is that skills in use of English to understand self and social values are identifiable and subject to mastery learning techniques and performance evaluation.<sup>12</sup> It is valuable both to teachers and to students if specific objectives can be identified in any course. But ability to define and refine objectives requires experience with students and knowledge about evaluation techniques. I am still a novice with respect to this ability, though I have been studying about it for years.

To return to the central question here, how far should English for the liberal arts go into other subjects of the curriculum? I believe this mostly depends on the interests of the learners (teachers and students). But the content of English courses should not duplicate courses taught by other departments, even though we center upon English as the method of approach to the material. The English course should never more than complement or reinforce other department programs. We may have electives called "Readings in Philosophy," "Readings in the Language Arts," or "Readings in the Theatrical Arts," but not "The Philosophy of Aristotle," "Phonetics," or "Modern Theatrical Technique." The latter courses should be offered by the departments of philosophy, linguistics and dramatic arts, respectively.

For all English courses, methodology should focus on use of English; methodologies of other disciplines must remain secondary, less important or even neglected entirely, where learners are only interested in ideas related to those subjects. So if I were to organize a course called "Readings in History," the material used in the latter part of the course would closely reflect the make-up of the class. If they were mostly History minors and majors, then I would include or have them choose some passages about historiography. A term paper or class project might have them using primary sources. But if the class contained many students from other disciplines, such as geography minors or French majors, I would not have them read technical material. Term papers would involve only secondary or tertiary sources. And in all cases, the methodology emphasized would remain use of English.

Where the subject of the course is English literature, such as "Shakespeare's Works" or "Modern Poetry," there is more controversy about the use of English, especially in my Faculty of Arts where there has been a trend to more use of Thai. A course may have lectures and discussion in Thai and teachers may even allow exam questions to be answered in Thai. To me this is not an English course it is not English for the liberal arts where the dominant and constant methodology in learning is not use of English.

I am fluent in Thai and the temptation to use Thai to save time and effort occurs frequently, but I have learned over the years that with patience and planning no English literature problem or subject is too difficult for our students to study or discuss in English.

Many courses offered by liberal arts English departments are less controversially or more directly supporting of liberal arts education objectives. Almost any English writing or speaking course requires the kind of creativity, self-exploration and communication experiences deemed important as learning in the liberal arts. But for the writing or speaking course to relate to the liberal arts program, we must ask what we should have them write or talk about, and to what level of abstraction or profundity. I do not assign idealess narratives even to Science freshmen. Rather than "My Summer Vacation", minimally I would assign "What I learned During the Summer." Most of my writing assignments for freshmen and sophomores focus on significant values and events. New third-year English majors and minors begin practising skills in writing academic research, analysis of events important to them and criticism of art. Later they try purely creative writing of poetry, short stories or plays.

Here I have inadvertently moved into the last part of this paper about attempts or experiments in the English program at the Faculty of Arts of Silpakorn University. Before going into more detail, a recapitulation of what has been discussed so far may be useful.

I have summarized purposes of the liberal arts curriculum and I have tried to argue that university-level English in Thailand can and should complement and contribute directly to character development, exploration of values and learning to learn in the humanities, which are different ways to express the fundamental aims of a liberal education. Secondly, I have argued that English courses, with respect to methodology, should remain only English courses – we do not teach the methods of economic geography – there are others who do that better than we can – but we can help students learn how they can use English to study economic geography. And if economic geography is accepted as part of the liberal arts (or humanities) curriculum, then it is our responsibility to aid those with an interest or need to know how to use English to study economic geography. And we use every trick or technique at our command to keep learners using only English in learning.

### **The Reality**

It would be professionally stimulating to be involved in an English program so rational, so disciplined, and so relevant to its faculty curriculum. But unfortunately this program does not yet exist, and it is too soon to tell whether our English program in the Faculty of Arts at Silpakorn will move in the direction of rational planning, discipline and relevance to the liberal arts.

First of all, consensus does not exist in our English department, either with respect to having English for the liberal arts, or with respect to English as method or discipline. Secondly, even where agreement exists in principle, in planning and conducting classes, principles may give way to convenience. But this is accepted. The principle of academic freedom remains paramount. Individual teachers must reach their own conclusions, maintain their own discipline and plan and conduct their own courses in the way they perceive as best for their students.

However, there are encouraging developments. The departments is considering curriculum proposals to make all English courses relevant to humanities or liberal arts subjects, at least with respect to the names of the courses and course descriptions.

Secondly, teachers are becoming more willing to debate the issue of use of English in English courses. Although there remains strong disagreement among individuals, the facts may be eroding the position that our students are too weak to use English all the time in solving course and class problems. For example, I taught Science Faculty freshmen last year and although I am fluent in Thai, and our science freshmen tend to be a little weaker in English than arts freshmen, I found that I could use English with them all the time, in class or out of class. In all cases, when they had something important to communicate, they could find the appropriate words for it.

My sophomore arts students discovered quickly, to their own amazement, that they could spend a whole week, day and night, using and hearing almost nothing

but English, during an "English Camp" that I and several other teachers organized recently. There were a few, out of twenty-four, who did not cooperate sincerely, but the rest strove to use only English, in all activities and casual talk, and they prospered, enjoyed themselves immensely, and developed more confidence in using English.

This year I am teaching arts freshmen (in addition to junior English majors and minors). The course is oriented toward social values, with material from philosophy, psychology and literature, in addition to articles from popular magazines such as "Reader's Digest" which are concerned about values and relationships. Very little of the material is simplified. All reading and writing, and most discussion, is oriented to inquiry and self-realization. Needless to say, all is in English.

Despite the curriculum or content orientation, skill development objectives are included: clarity in writing, outlining in reading, questioning in discussion, and comprehension in listening. There is a two-year plan with respect to skill objectives, and there are weekly structure review problems based on what I have learned about common structural mistakes in freshman and sophomore writing. There are occasional, extra vocabulary lessons, though I tend to believe that students learn vocabulary more by repeatedly finding words in context than by memorizing them in isolation.

But the focus and highlight each week is class discussion of an idea, based on a brief passage from the Great Books published by Encyclopaedia Britannica. This is another two-year plan, and discussions become less controlled and less aided by the instructor each week. At the end of two years, students given only an abstract topic, such as "Fate" or "Truth" or "Slavery", will be able to develop and maintain a discussion centered on social values and personal experiences, a discussion which explores the topic in depth without any interference or help from a teacher, and entirely in English.

Perhaps I shall be able to report more about these experiments and developments next year after thorough evaluation. But as long as I am employed as a professional English teacher in a faculty of arts, I shall endeavor to make English programs more relevant to student goals of learning to use English to learn about self, relationships, values and the ideas and interests of the liberal arts.



## Notes

1. Not without controversy. See "Pulling Back from Permissiveness." *Time* 111, 13 (March 27, 1978).
2. Though some may believe that liberal or general education in Thailand requires more definition: see Paitoon Sinlarat. (abstract of) "General Education: Developing a Program for Thai Universities" University of Pittsburgh, 1976. in *Dissertations Abstracts International* 37, 5, p. 2678-A.
3. For a clear and thorough description of general education. see Philip H. Phenix. *Realms of Meaning: A Philosophy of The Curriculum for General Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
4. Richard McKeon. "Character and the Arts and Disciplines." in Clarence H. Faust and Jessica Feingold. Eds.. *Approaches to Education for Character Strategies for Change in Higher Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).
5. For similar definition. see Edwin J. Delattre. "The Humanities Can Irrigate Deserts." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 15, 6 (Oct. 11, 1977).
6. L. Thomas Hopkins, in "The Overlooked Factor." *Phi Delta Kappan* 55, 10 (June 1974). and Bruce D. Smith and Ronald L. Van Sickle. in "Focusing on Inquiry Teaching Behaviors," *The High School Journal* 58, 7 (April 1975) provide support for this statement.
7. For more discussion see Howard Kirschenbaum, Merrill Harmin, Leland Howe and Sidney B. Simon. "In Defence of Values Clarification." *Phi Delta Kappan* 58, 10 (June 1977).
8. Most recently, Beverly Galyean. "A Confluent Design for Language Teaching." *TESOL Quarterly* 11, 2 (June 1977), and Paul G. La Farge. "Uses of Social Silence in the Interpersonal Dynamics of Community Language Learning" *TESOL Quarterly* 11, 4 (Dec. 1977).
9. Henry David Aiken, "Analytic Philosophy and Educational Development," in Z. George Barnett. Ed.. *Philosophy and Educational Development* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).
10. Rebecca M. Valette and Renee S. Disick. *Modern Language Performance Objectives and Individualization: A Handbook* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).
11. Benjamin S. Bloom. Ed., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives The Classification of Educational Goals Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* (London: Longmans, 1956).
12. See James H. Block. Ed.. *Mastery Learning Theory and Practice* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971). Benjamin S. Bloom. *Human Characteristics and School Learning* (New York; McGraw-Hill, 1976). and Arthur W. Combs, W. James Popham and Philip L. Hosford. "Behaviorism and Humanism: A Synthesis?" *Educational Leadership* 35, 1 (Oct. 1977).