Demands for English in Thailand:
Meeting International, Regional, National, and Institutional Expectations

Rawiwan Buppanhasamai
Chulalongkorn University Language Institute
E-mail address: rawiwan@fulbrightmail.org

English has undoubtedly been viewed as a global language by its speakers all over the world, for it is spoken as a second language in some countries and as a lingua franca in the others (Crystal, 2003). It is in this latter case that the notion of English as an international language (EIL) comes into play. EIL is operative when speakers of different languages use another shared language as a way to communicate. Such communication can range from personal matters such as travelling abroad, interracial marriages, Overseas education, and personal entertainment to global activities such as business correspondence, national policies, regional economics and politics, and international affairs. Thus, it goes without saying that English appears frequently in many countries, including Thailand.

At a regional level, not only has English become a lingua franca in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), it has also been regarded as an official language (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This status has pressed the government, i.e. policy makers to implement new methods and policies regarding English language education in each ASEAN country. Kirkpatrick’s (2010) recent work explores the balance between learning English and learning local languages at the same time and makes policy-making recommendations. He discusses economic growth and political and internal affairs among all countries that emphasize the burning need for English language ability to communicate.
The Roadmap of an ASEAN Community 2009-2015 (ASEAN, 2009) describes blueprints of how to tackle political-security, economic, and socio-cultural communities. Free flow of goods, services, investment, capital, and skilled labor put each country in the position where they need to improve themselves in many ways. By the same token, the Thai government has to observe ASEAN policies. These pressures have led to top-down policymaking. With regard to language policy, English is expected to be a mandatory language among ASEAN country members. English speakers would benefit from having more employment opportunities across countries. As a result, the Thai government started the year 2012 with a new English learning resolution, “English-Speaking Year” as a way toward improving English language proficiency among Thai people putting them on the same level with the neighboring countries by 2015 (Hodal, 2012).

The importance of the English language has increasingly been a central issue in the field of education both worldwide and in Thailand (Wiriyachitra, 2001). English is one of the mandatory subjects in school at K-12 level and some years in tertiary education. It is clear that English has played a key role as a gate-keeping device, employed chiefly to measure students’ academic success. The compulsory nature of English education in Thailand creates a mounting tension when the result that the Ordinary National Educational Tests (O-Net) of compulsory subjects, including English, each year reveals nothing but frustration to all stakeholders.

To exemplify, the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS, 2011) revealed the average percentage of English scores on the 2010 O-Net of primary, lower secondary and higher secondary students to be 20.99%, 16.19% and 19.22% respectively. The figures showed a dramatic fall from those of the previous years by 10-20%. There seems to appear a great deal of doubt and criticism on how English education is executed and why the quality of students' proficiency is headed.
in the opposite direction despite attempts to increase the quantity of teacher and learner training, the adaptation of new instructional models, and the growing number of English teachers in Thailand (OEC, 2008; OPM, 2007, 2012).

By the time English learners pass into the higher education system where they are enrolled in English foundation courses, many claim to have lost most of the English they have acquired during their decade-long training in basic education. Higher education lecturers sometimes place the blame on secondary school teachers, and these teachers then do the same to primary school teachers. Furthermore, many people blame after-school tutorials and cram schools that promote teaching to the tests. However, NIETS should also be held accountable for the failure of its test to motivate students into achieving higher proficiency levels.

Every year after the O-Net test results are revealed, the public and media incessantly discuss ways of improving the results. Each institution concerned has come up with new policies or regulations that are thought to help alleviate this deficiency. For example, the Ministry of Education launched an “English Speaking Year 2012” program in Thailand and the Minister of Education at that time mentioned that when Thailand becomes a part of the ASEAN Community, the English language would be vital for communication and he proposed that one day a week would be designated as an English speaking day (Bangkok Post, 2011). Another case is that the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), under the Ministry of Education, recently issued a 13-year higher educational policy (B.E. 2552-2556.)

The National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Thailand (NQF-HEd) Implementation Handbook (2006, p. 13) states expected qualifications of graduates at different levels—entry level, advanced diploma, bachelor’s, graduate
diploma, master’s, and doctoral degrees. These outcome-based qualifications are elaborated into five different domains: ethical and moral development, knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibility, and analytical and communication skills. To illustrate, the ‘knowledge’ domain clearly states that learners who complete basic education should have “a broad understanding of important knowledge and skill in eight general subject fields—Thai Language; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies, Religion and Culture; Health and Physical Education; Art; Career and Technology; and Foreign Language, including English.” The last domain ‘analytical and communication skills’ includes the ability to “communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing, in Thai language and in English” (ibid., p. 14).

In higher education, many institutions are obliged to comply with the government plans and policies. Chulalongkorn University (CU) has also adopted these domains and expanded them into nine desirable characteristics of CU Graduates 2010: being knowledgeable, having good morals, having higher order thinking skills, possessing essential capabilities, having an inquiring mind and knowing how to learn, having leadership qualities, maintaining well-being, being community-minded and possessing social responsibility, and sustaining Thainess in a globalized world. The fourth domain ‘possessing essential capabilities’ states clearly that CU bachelors should have “a good command of English when reading and being able to communicate through fairly good speaking, listening and writing” (Chulalongkorn University, 2010, p. 2).

In other Thai educational contexts, English is increasingly incorporated into curricula in many schools. In addition, increasing numbers of English programs in primary and secondary schools, as well as bilingual, and international schools in the past decades are strong evidence of growing demands for English in Thailand. The
demands of international schools and the long waiting list of getting into the existing international schools tell the academics that the current English education is not sufficient.

The need for English in Thailand seems unstoppable especially due to pressure from economics and business domains such as ASEAN and the government. Although many Thai public and private sectors have carried out some research to investigate new ways to improve the quality of English education, more extensive educational research and professional trainings should strongly continue to be promoted nationwide. English teachers are responsible for the quality of teaching and learning in order to keep up with the increasing expectation from all stakeholders such as students, parents, educational institutions, employers, and national policies.

That English learning and teaching in Thailand has been ineffective is an issue that needs to be brought to focus. Such major concerns are, for example, factors that have left English language learning and teaching ineffective; factors that would help, rather than hinder, Thai learners to learn the language better and more sustainably in a context where English is studied as a foreign language; the extent to which English language teachers can develop their English proficiency and pedagogical methodology, given the right policy from the top down and implemented appropriately from the bottom up. The dilemma of getting a good education, especially language education, and therefore a good job, is a sufficiently strong driving force for learners to develop English language skills. In a nutshell, English skills are urgently needed for communication with people from other nations, for a pursuance of higher-level education, and for professional success after graduation. With Thailand joining ASEAN, the need to be on par with other countries is a must.
The drive to meet international, regional, national, and institutional expectations puts Thai academia at the forefront of improving English language learning.

**The Author**

Rawiwan Buppanhasamai is currently a lecturer at CULI and a Ph.D. candidate in EIL at Chulalongkorn University, where she received her B.A. in Spanish. She obtained an M.A. in Linguistics and a TESOL certificate from San José State University, USA. Her interested areas of research are language education and discourse analysis.

**References**


