

**REVIEW: MEASURING A TEXTBOOK
AGAINST THE THAI FOUNDATION ENGLISH
COURSE GOALS AND STANDARDS**

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Presumably because few textbooks on their own cover what is officially expected in Thai university English foundation courses, the option of selecting more than one textbook is often taken. Not only does this add to student expenses but it also makes achieving the two official goals and seven associated standards set for these courses all the more difficult. This review therefore looks at a recently published textbook that Thai universities might consider adopting as a foundation English text measuring it against these goals and standards. The text which was selected to do this with is *Natural English Upper-intermediate* published by Oxford University Press because it is one of the more recently published (2003) texts which might be considered for use in these courses.

Goal 1: To use English to communicate in social settings both inside and outside the university.

The first thing to note about all the descriptors for the standards which clarify goal 1 is three out of four of them are clearly productive goals, indicated by the words 'will use'. Only the third standard is defined as a more passive activity of 'recognizing' and 'understanding' which while requiring activity in the cognitive sense does not insist students will use this knowledge in their actual speaking or writing of English.

Standard 1: Students will use spoken and written English for personal statement, and for enjoyment and enrichment.

It is probably easier to find opportunities in the textbook for students to make personal statements in spoken and written form than opportunities for enjoyment and enrichment. Focusing on just that aspect of this standard the 'lead-in' section in many of this textbook's units not only activates relevant script or schema for students but in doing so personalizes the lesson's theme by eliciting personal statements. Other textbook speaking sections with various headings such as 'share experiences' and 'it's your turn' focus less on building script and schema and more on providing opportunities for students to make personal statements. Each unit also has a writing task, and about half of these do require students to make personal statements. However, the contents pages seem to give these tasks far more prominence than do the units themselves.

Standard 2: Students will use spoken and written English to participate appropriately in social interaction.

This standard is maybe best considered under two subheadings. Spoken appropriacy and written appropriacy.

Spoken Appropriacy

While Unit 7 (the first in the High Intermediate book) has one activity in its 'lead-in' section which asks students to consider what is appropriate to say on first meeting someone versus greeting someone you already know, it is difficult to find other material in the text which easily lends itself to helping students meet this standard.

Written Appropriacy

Although little explicit help is provided in raising students' awareness of written appropriacy, in so far as the writing tasks provide an audience and context teachers could add a focus on appropriacy to many of the existing writing tasks to meet the requirements of this standard. For example an audience (travel

company) and context (angry customer writing a letter of complaint) are both given with the writing task on page 97. While the task already gives some guidance on appropriacy (how to keep the letter polite) the teacher could add to this appropriacy focus by highlighting polite language forms suitable for such a situation. These could also be contrasted with language which would be unsuitable either because it could sound overly polite and therefore sarcastic or too casual and as a result too easily dismissed.

Standard 3: Students will recognize and understand cultural differences.

This is problematic. The text being an international edition does not really put Thai and Western culture in clear contrast. Therefore in meeting this standard teachers would need to identify cultural contrasts and design additional activities or questions to draw students' attention to cultural differences between the textbook material and Thai situations outside the text. Such contrasts could include asking students for Thai equivalents to the Garden of Eden (p. 37), or how body language and appropriate behaviour in a job interview vary between Western and Thai culture (pp. 86-87).

Standard 4: Students will use appropriate learning strategies to extend their communicative competence.

The 'word booster' section in each unit generally achieves this. Teachers would however need to develop supplementary learner strategy development to focus on other areas of communicative competence such as those which might assist in listening, speaking, reading and indeed writing. For example, teachers might like to help students develop their writing skills by adapting writing tasks into a more structured process writing approach.

Goal 2: To use English to help achieve personal and academic goals and to promote life-long learning.

The importance of this goal for any foundation English course would depend heavily on whether the students in the class were to

take additional English courses in academic English or other relevant English courses later on in their degree. Where the same foundation English course is taught to different faculties as is the case at Chulalongkorn University, while some students will move on to compulsory academic English courses (e.g. Communication Arts Faculty students) after completing their foundation English courses others will not (e.g. Engineering Faculty students). Therefore it remains important to check that materials to be used in foundation English courses actually meet all the requirements of this goal.

Standard 1: Students will use English to access and process information and to construct knowledge in both spoken and written forms.

Since the textbook integrates the four macro skills in theme-based units it lends itself more to facilitating the attainment of this standard than the use of separate reading, writing and listening books might otherwise. One advantage of any four-skills integrated text is that its reading and listening material can be used as input for both speaking and/or writing. Listening and reading tasks can require students to access information which they must then process in constructing what they need to complete a speaking or writing task.

Standard 2: Students will use English to participate in academic contexts.

How well any textbook or course achieves this standard will depend greatly on just how we define academic contexts. Obvious spoken academic contexts might include sharing presenting and/or questioning ideas in a seminar or tutorial, taking lecture notes, or writing academic seminar/tutorial papers and coursework as well as exam essays. The textbook as is seems to provide more material relevant to developing students' academic speaking skills than note taking or academic writing skills. Additional tasks and materials would need to be developed by teachers to meet these requirements. However the themes of each unit could be utilized in doing this. The temptation to simply use a

different text to meet the academic writing requirements of this standard should probably be resisted as the more fragmented course materials become the more difficult it is for lower level students to learn from them. This is especially important to remember in foundation courses where students of all proficiency levels take the same course with the same core materials for the same number of limited hours. Using one rather than several textbooks in foundation courses helps lower-level students by making it possible for one theme to last for a number of class hours, which allows for more theme-based vocabulary to be repeated in the context of reading and listening and then used in speaking and writing than would otherwise be the case. This repetition helps to make materials more comprehensible for lower-levels student by giving them more chances to guess the meaning of new words, phrases and grammar patterns and fewer new words and phrases to learn. Indeed using fragmented materials which force students to rely more on word lists than getting the meaning of new words by seeing/hearing them used in context several times often leads them into making unnecessary mistakes which teachers may lack the time to correct yet adversely affect students' grades. This is because the grades in university foundation English courses in Thailand often reflect the students' grammatical and lexical accuracy in using words and phrases from their course materials.

Standard 3: Students will use appropriate learning strategies to acquire, construct, and apply academic knowledge and to develop critical thinking skills.

The textbook certainly appears to be lacking in material aimed at meeting this requirement. However, teachers could and since this is a mandatory standard indeed should include classroom activities which teach the strategies mentioned here. In-class and take-home extension tasks based broadly on the themes of each unit could be used to ensure that students actually do, through the use of appropriate learning strategies, acquire, construct, and apply knowledge as well as developing critical thinking skills. Additional questions could also be added to the existing activities in the textbook with this particular standard in mind.

General Impression

Overall, this series seems worth considering alongside others from the full range of publishers that distribute in Thailand for use as a foundation English textbook in Thai universities but only if teachers have the time to supplement it with additional material and tasks that cover standards it does not directly provide relevant material towards meeting. It certainly seems to meet Goal 1 better than Goal 2 which is probably also the case with many other English textbooks which attempt to cover the four macro skills. A browse through English textbooks now on sale in Thai bookstores raises the probability that it is quite likely very few textbooks indeed would meet equally well both goals and their associated standards. Certainly, provided supplements were developed, *Natural English Upper-intermediate* has the potential to meet the two goals and standards we are supposed to ensure our students achieve in Thai university foundation English courses better than any combination of unrelated reading, writing and listening books might.

The Author

Kenneth Murray first taught English in Thailand as part of an Australian volunteer program over ten years ago soon after graduating from the University of Newcastle with a B.A. (Hons), Dip. Ed. After returning to Australia and teaching ESL in the ELICOS and adult migrant education fields, he took up a teaching position near Tokyo with one of Japan's largest conversation school systems. In this system over a period of several years he not only taught but also completed a Master of Applied Linguistics from the University of Southern Queensland, earning the Dean's Commendation for Outstanding Achievement. Upon completion of this course, he worked for the same company as a Teacher Trainer/Manager and then in its publishing arm editing and authoring classroom and home study materials. He is currently teaching at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute.

