Theoretical Overview

SHAPING THE URBAN CLASSROOMS OF TOMORROW: CREATING A RURAL MYTH?

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Abstract

Many rural Thai teachers of English find themselves teaching a subject that they feel they are neither confident nor competent to teach. International conferences and teacher training seminars come and go, leaving these 'up-country' teachers with the same problems to deal with on a daily basis.

Some educational commentators have stated that there is an ELT divide in Thailand that pits qualified English language teachers in urban settings against those who are qualified in other disciplines that are required to teach English in the countryside as part of their weekly teaching requirement.

This paper offers suggestions as to how rural teachers can benefit from developments and support from urban settings and proposes ways that teachers can collaborate and work cooperatively together. Only when this 'coming together' has taken place will the English language teaching profession have one voice and be able to pro-actively shape our classrooms of the future.

Keywords: Thailand, English language, rural development, teacher training.

การจัดห้องเรียนในเมืองในอนาคต: การสร้างตำนานในชนบท

บทคัดย่อ

ครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษในชนบทไทยจำนวนมากรู้สึกไม่มั่นใจหรือมีความสามารถในการสอนน้อย การ
ประชุมนานาชาติและการสัมมนาฝึกอบรมครูจะเกิดขึ้นเป็นครั้งคราว แล้วครูเหล่านี้ ก็ยังคงมีปัญหาเดิมใน
การสอนประจำวัน

นักการศึกษาบางคนได้กล่าวว่ามีการแบ่ง ELT ในประเทศไทย โดยแบ่งครูภาษาอังกฤษที่มีคุณภาพไว้ใน
เมืองกับผู้ที่มีคุณวุฒิในสาขาอื่น ๆ ที่จะต้องสอนภาษาอังกฤษในชนบทเพื่อเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการสอนทุก
สัปดาห์

งานวิจัยนี้นำเสนอวิธีที่ครูชนบทจะได้รับประโยชน์จากการพัฒนาและการสนับสนุนจากบริบทในเมืองและ
เสนอแนะวิธีที่ครูสามารถทำงานร่วมกัน ในการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ ซึ่งเป็นวิธีเดียวที่จะนำมาสู่การสอน
ภาษาอังกฤษในแนวทางเดียวกันและสามารถที่จะสร้างห้องเรียนแห่งอนาคตได้

Introduction

Every year without fail, Thailand hosts a myriad of conferences announcing
the latest innovations that will cure the failing education sector. Professors
and lecturers from around the world explain how and why we are in our
present predicament and suggest ways in which we can turn around our
ailing classrooms. The vast majority of these improvements involve quick-fix
training or throwing money at the problems in the hope that they will
disappear. This may appear to be a rather cynical view; however, it was
George Bernard Shaw (1973) who stated that '......the power of accurate
observation is commonly called cynicism by those who have not got it'
(p.228).

In 2006, Dr. Somwung Pitiyanuwat, the then Director of the Office for
National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) stated
in his now legendary interview with the *Bangkok Post* (Johnson, 2006) that
of the 40,000 schools in Thailand, 75% were in a "qualitative coma" and
should be placed in an intensive care unit. Recent O-Net (Ordinary National
Education Test) test results do nothing to show that any major
improvements have taken place since then.

Whilst there have been reports that the rural/urban divide has been
narrowing over the last 20 years, it is still disturbing to note that in 1990
rural students from the northeast of Thailand were more than seven times

less likely to progress to grades 10-12 (upper secondary school) when compared to students from urban areas (Pattaravanich, Williams, Lyson & Archavanitkul, 2005). The media attributes this to the fact that the Bangkok schools are normally more modern compared to those of the north and northeast (Ahuja, 2011); however, this is a rather simplistic viewpoint.

Conversely, there are some educational commentators that point to the Matthew Effect (Walberg & Tsai, 1983) in education and more importantly in English language education (Lamb, 2011) where studies have shown that over time, cumulative advantages have led to further advantages and also initial disadvantages having had an escalating negative effect on learning outcomes (Shaywitz et al., 1995). It is even possible that free educational content on the internet, issued free to bridge the divide, could contribute to an ever widening digital divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' or in Thailand's case, urban and rural communities. The digital divide is currently being studied by Reich (2012) and one of the aspects of his research is trying to stop this rising tide scenario.

Thai culture and its complicated values system for those who are not Thai, play an important part in why educational stagnation has persisted for so many years, with urban Bangkokians having more self centred, achievement and competence values compared to their rural counterparts (Komin 1991). This value system based on the saving of 'face', coupled with the 'kreng jai' consideration and 'form over content' in education (Komin 1991) make a dangerous mix. Especially when you consider the importance education has to play in the moulding of Thailand's society, economy and more specifically, Thailand's active participation in the economic integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2015. Thailand's population and most importantly their politicians, need to appreciate what is happening on the world stage and which language countries are using to get there; which just happens to be English.

Perceived problems and difficulties

The majority of primary school teachers in rural Thailand have not been versed in the ways of teaching English. They tend to be from other disciplines, for example, Thai language and physical education and have to teach a variety of subjects to the class that they are responsible for. The 1999

Education Act was passed in order to move Thailand forward from a teacher centred system of education to one that was more learner centred. The Act also paved the way for a more communicative approach to English language teaching in the classroom, which brings with it, its own problems as it is the vast majority of the teachers as well as the students that do not know how the communicative approach works in practice.

Without sufficient training or support, these teachers are expected to embrace new methodologies and learning/teaching strategies when they attempt to teach English in the classroom, even though they know that their own English language skills are below par and their workload is increasing on a daily basis due to the burden of extra administrative duties that they are required to carry out as part of their daily routine. This is by no means a criticism of the teachers; they work extremely hard under stressful conditions to do the best that they can with the tools they are provided.

Short training courses have failed to impart sustainable knowledge and skills in the past, due to the lack of support for the teachers in rural areas after the initial training has taken place. Once they have returned revitalised from their two day seminar, their enthusiasm tends to wane as the new materials they have acquired from their courses run out and their increased effort and enthusiasm are ignored by those who did not attend the training. There is very rarely any form of continuation training given to these teachers. The majority of basic education teachers who teach English work in rural schools, so the impact of this dilemma is felt more in the countryside.

If Thailand's academics took some time to critically review the curriculum for foreign languages in the Thai government's Curriculum 51 documentation, they would see that it is virtually impossible to complete the first year's English language curriculum in the time allowed. For example, first year students have 1 hour per week for English classes, increasing to 2 hours at grades two and three; and grades four, five and six are allowed 3 hours. Students start the New Year at a disadvantage as they haven't finished the previous year's work to a high enough standard and so the decline is perpetuated exponentially.

One of the best ways that the urban/rural divide can be demonstrated is by looking at the level of poverty. If a stranger was to visit Thailand and have tours around urban and rural schools, they would be struck by the disparity between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. Poverty is an area that Krashen, Lee &

McQuillan (2010) emphasise as a problem that stifles reading achievement due to lack of libraries amongst other things, and that when eradicated, would boost the chances of children, formally in the poverty trap of being able to benefit from reading and then second language acquisition.

Since the 1999 Education Act was passed initiating the start of teacher centred communicative learning in Thailand, for many, the way that teachers have to implement these new contingencies have never really been explained to the teachers at the chalk-face. There are not many people from the Ministry of Education who are prepared to state that the present system is not working, as that would involve a loss of face. Unfortunately for Thailand's education system, face plays an important part in Thai culture and the upkeep of 'kiat' (prestige), 'saksi' (honour), 'chuesiang' (fame), 'barami' (popularity) and eventual 'nata' (saving face) (Persons, 2008) seems to have taken precedence over effective management of the education system, as successive Ministers of Education have come and gone without the rural divide and basic English language education difficulties being addressed in an aggressive and timely manner.

There is a huge disparity between the countryside and the cities which are progressing at a much faster rate (Klausner, 1993). The rural teachers are at a disadvantage due to their lack of resources and support from the government compared to their urban colleagues who by their chance location in towns and cities, find themselves in better run schools teaching students from better socioeconomic backgrounds who have less social problems to deal with. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have more frequently attention deficits which may well stifle the development of language and reading skills (Stevens, Lauinger & Neville, 2009).

Unfortunately, the vast majority of time children spend at Thai schools is on non-academic subjects; some educational commentators would say a staggering 70% of the time spent in elementary schools (von Feigenblatt, 2010) which does not allow much time for subjects that are tested as part of the national testing policy. As mentioned previously the results from the O-Net tests have shown some very low scores ("Grade 12 students' average Onet scores below 50%," 2011); average scores of below 15% for mathematics and below 20% for English language are just two examples. Blaming the testing format is not the solution to Thailand's educational woes (Intathep, 2011a).

This predicament does not stop nearly all of the students from progressing to the next grade every year and so the process continues where every student progresses every year to the next level, with no child left behind. The result is that students in Thailand are taught English for twelve years if they complete Mathayom 6 (grade 12) and can barely speak the language, let alone read and write. University English language teachers are expected to perform miracles in order for the universities to produce graduates of a high enough standard to compete in the workplace.

The added incentive of the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement in 2015 did not spur the Thai government to accept English as a Second Language when they had the opportunity to do so (Bunnag, 2010), as it was felt that Thailand would appear to the outside world as having been colonised. However, 2012 is a year where schools are encouraged to have an "English Day" allowing students to spend at least one day a week speaking English all day at school. This could prove difficult if we take into account the lack of English language skills that the teachers possess, particularly those from the countryside.

Ideas and possible solutions

The curriculum for foreign languages needs to be reassessed with a view to making it more realistic so that teachers have a fighting chance of completing their teaching to the required standard. It is not outside the bounds of reality to suggest that English could be taught from Prathom 4 (grade 4) onwards, rather than Prathom 1 (grade 1) if there is not enough time in the curriculum in the early years; however, when children do start to learn English, they will need sufficient time, with well trained teachers who can teach in a learner-centred communicative way, in line with the 1999 Education Act, for Thailand's students to stand any chance of progressing to the next grade on merit.

The course-books that have been approved by the Ministry of Education in the past vary in quality dramatically. Some are very good, whilst others were designed for the Mexican curriculum and should not be used. Rural English language teacher stands no chance of success if they are required to use books that do not fit the curriculum requirements. If this practice is allowed to

continue then there is every chance that the embarrassing national test results will continue for the foreseeable future.

The Thai government is actively looking at supplying primary school children with tablet PCs in order to improve grades. Rumours abound as to what tablet will be chosen. The iPad starts at about $500 a unit; however, India has embarked on an ambitious initiative with Aakash tablets costing around $35 (Watters, 2011).What the Ministry of Education really needs to understand is that the majority of rural schools do not have the internet, so these tablet computers would need to be self sufficient with curriculum specific programs to enhance the learning process. This is a worry as there seems to be a race against time to have all our primary school children with the latest in personal e-learning, without sufficient thought to the repairs, damage and losses that will not be supported by the existing infrastructure. Hewlett-Packard has provided a support package for maintenance of donated computers in China (Ying, 2011). It is hoped that the Thai government has a similar support system in place if tablets are going to be issued to students as schools do not have the money for repairs and maintenance and neither do the students, parents or teachers.

More time needs to be spent on academic subjects during the school year. Non-academic subjects are an important part of the curriculum and human development; however, soft skills such as team work, critical thinking and problem solving can be acquired whilst students are learning their hard skills as long as courses are designed with these skills in mind. Administrative duties that teachers need to undertake must be kept to a minimum, which may well involve the employment of extra administrators in schools. More administrators could lead to a bigger pool of talent to choose from when directors of schools are required and supervisors for local education areas need to be selected.

Graduates that have majored in subjects where there is a teacher shortage should be encouraged to take the opportunity offered by the government to obtain a teaching certificate. After one year, these newly qualified teachers would have the tools needed to pass on the new methodologies required for Thailand to move into the 21st Century; however, better government control is needed as the recent scandal concerning certificates that were bought and sold for cash has shown the need for tighter controls on the institutions that are providing this service (Intathep, 2011b).

Graham (2007) concocted an elaborate scheme where proposed teacher training would be conducted in the same way that a pyramid selling scheme operates. The legitimacy of these pyramid selling practices was outside the scope of that paper; however, the opportunity of setting up a network in the shape of a pyramid capable of training 3905 teachers in one year seemed rather attractive.

However, the idea that it was possible to train so many teachers in one year was doomed to failure from the start due to time restraints, teacher workloads and the importance of the use of substitute teachers for those involved in the proposed training. Without government assistance, a project that size was never going to work. The idea had to be adapted in a way that would allow existing teachers to give their time and mentor/coach those who need it. After listening to advice from the Ministry of Education it was decided that a pilot project would be conducted to see if this type of training would succeed on a small scale, basically from the bottom up (Graham, 2009a). Three years after the first project finished, more schools are gradually benefiting from coaching and mentoring; however, progress in slow due to logistics.

Rather than allowing schools to continually kill creativity (Robinson 2006), there is a way that the failed project by Graham (2007) could still rise from the ashes if we were to use some divergent thinking. Instead of a pyramid structure, why not use existing universities in urban settings and their resources to provide mentors and coaches to schools in rural areas? To be truthful, most universities collect Memorandums of Understandings as if they were stamps. It would be interesting to know how many of these agreements actually bear fruit. The government could reward those universities that conduct real training by allowing these activities to reflect positively in the end of year reporting process as part of the existing quality assurance mechanisms. Universities could factor this into their internal quality assurance process as part of the professional development of their teaching staff. Anything that improves the internal quality assurance of an educational institution would be a welcome relief as internal quality assurance is not well maintained in Thailand (Graham, 2009b) as most educational establishments follow the existing external procedures. Having effective internal quality assurance systems in place would automatically improve the external quality assurance reporting process.

The Rajabhat system would seem ideal as there are Rajabhat Universities located all over Thailand; however, convenience may not be the best option. The leading universities in Thailand should see it as a duty and a responsibility to assist with co-teaching (O'Loughlin, 2011) and helping to form a type of collaborative teaching and learning network (Mason and Watts, 2012) as well as coaching and mentoring in the traditional way. Rather than a pyramid, the structure of this network would be much flatter and it would be controlled by the local education area offices around the country reporting back up to the Ministry of Education.

The author of this article is affiliated to Khon Kaen University International College (KKUIC) and has been given permission to spend one day per week conducting collaborative research (Erichsen and Goldenstein, 2011). During these periods, time is also spent advising a local education area in Udon Thani. Both activities are not even conducted in the same province as KKUIC. To this end, an international university faculty now has access to 156 schools in 4 districts. This involves a lot of cooperation and collaboration between the local education area office, directors of schools, teachers and those from the visiting universities and foundations that are aiding the projects undertaken. Rather than just offering courses, continuation training can be given and most importantly moral support. In the coming months, a Memorandum of Understanding will be drawn up for quality assurance purposes.

Burnett (2010) calls for more research on children's use of texts in educational settings. Research into second language acquisition (Krashen 1981) details the benefits of reading and how poverty prevents many from having the opportunity to read (Krashen, Lee & McQuillan, 2008). To investigate and hopefully assist in alleviating these problems, a research project is underway to use a set of Thai curriculum specific DVDs called Smooth Transitions for audio visual activities (Graham, 2010) in addition to SpeaKIT voice recognition software and comics (Graham 2011) to enable students to practice their four skills in line with the Thai curriculum and O-Net testing practices. This process involves forging new valuable long-lasting personal relationships whilst undertaking training and research using new technologies (Neville, 2011).

The project will involve Prathom 4-6 (grades 4-6) students from one rural school who, in addition to their normal classes of English, will have one

extra hour of English per week, which is allowed by the Thai government, in order to increase their English language skills. The first three grades of primary school children were considered to be too young to deal with the computer tasks required of this project as they did not seem to possess the necessary computer literacy skills in a previous pilot project. Students will have the opportunity to listen and watch performed dialogues on DVDs in addition to their normal work from the course-book and then have the chance to practice for themselves.

In addition, they will complete gap-fill exercises using comics and then practice their reading and pronunciation skills using the SpeaKIT voice recognition software. The software will give the students immediate feedback as to whether their pronunciation was understood as well as producing a report that informs the instructor of where the problem areas are for each student. These errors will be collated and teacher intervention will take place to tackle the problems with the hope that they can be eradicated. This will give the students and supervising teachers the opportunity to join the new digital generation of learners (Sanchez, Salinas, Contreras & Meyer, 2011).

In order for rural teachers to be on a level footing with their urban colleagues, they need to be supported in their integration of communicative activities and their course-books. The use of DVDs, comics and SpeaKIT voice recognition software are just some of the activities that have been trialled in urban as well as rural schools, which has now led to further research projects combining all these activities. Help has been provided to the local education area office concerning the preparation of an ASEAN curriculum and the design and implementation of courses for O-Net test training for students and teachers. Not just quick fix solutions, but continuation training and with the assistance of Udon Education Foundation (UEF), there is sometimes financial support as well.

Even outside companies are prepared to 'forego profit and allow innovation and cooperation to prevail. Bill Zimmerman from the MakeBeliefsComix website has agreed that if comics are generated using his website, there would be no charge for materials that are made and they can be distributed free of charge to needy teachers. He even gave permission for them to be displayed on the internet for free download. There are many legitimate charities, foundations and generous people who are willing to help with books, equipment and their time. The vast majority of urban schools have most of

this already, charities, foundations and the general public can help to reduce the gap between urban and rural schools.

Conclusion

All these activities mentioned previously have been reported to various members of the Ministry of Education; however, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is not a realistic understanding about how poor the standard of English language skills really is in Thailand (especially in rural areas) and that education is thought of as more of a business rather than a vocation. As long as reality is ignored, Thailand will remain in the race until 2015 and then suddenly find that they have not only missed the boat, but they have also been left out of the starting line up for the next competition they try to enter.

There is a huge disparity between urban and rural schools. What is particularly interesting is that out of the 156 schools in the four districts that the author has access to for research purposes, there are only 45 schools that have Mathayom 1-3 (grades 7-9) and worse still, just one that has Mathayom 6 (grade 12). This begs the question as to where students would have to go if they want a secondary school education and whether they would actually relocate in order to do so.

A learning culture that is positive in nature must be promoted in order to develop a growth mindset for students and teachers to believe in (Mercer, 2012). Rural students deserve a fair chance of advancement through Thailand's education system the same as anyone else and with the correct mindset they will be able to have their opportunities via an equitable education system (Dweck, 2010). The mindset must evolve around the use of soft skills and discovery (O'Hear, 2012) as well as the traditional hard skills and attainment in national examinations.

In order for Thai teachers of English to shape the classrooms of the future, they need to have one voice and not be divided by wealth, ethnicity or location. Those in power have the duty and responsibility to explain why people need to learn English in these globalised times and demonstrate the correct attitude towards the use of English (Rajagopalan, 2011). By visiting a fellow ASEAN country like the Philippines, it is evident to the casual

observer that English teachers at their national and international conferences are much more vocal and unified in their negotiations with their government and are not afraid to voice their opinion individually or collectively, even if it causes discomfort to others.

The general public and more importantly the politicians in Thailand have to understand that English is just a tool and that it can be used for the good of the country as a whole. There is no need to think of Thailand's use of English as a second or foreign language as losing one's identity or culture. Thailand needs to get in step with the rest of ASEAN as a display of *choei* (Embree, 1950) or indifference at this juncture will not help Thailand's integration into the ASEAN economic cooperation in 2015.

Thailand's value system of ego first (Komin, 1990) must be put aside by those who make the decisions for the sake of the Thai people, so that Thailand's rural citizens are not excluded from what Mills (2005) states is '...the social prestige and material benefits of Thailand's modern (i.e. urban) achievements' (p. 389). By admitting that there is a serious problem with the education system, the government can then direct tertiary level educational establishments to assist the primary and secondary level schools by designing new curriculum, mentoring and coaching; and by offering continuous training to basic education teachers in order to give all students, not just those in urban areas, the opportunity to be part of the competitive workforce of the future. Only then will teachers have one voice and students have the opportunity to take their place next to their ASEAN counterparts as equals.

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