

* Mr. Robert Derrick Butterfield

The Generally Low Level of English among students in Thailand.

Some Suggestions and Proposals to Ameliorate the Current Situation.

Introduction;

Paradox: On the one hand, the importance of English generally recognized. Vital for international business. Thai not spoken outside Thailand. Job ads in Bangkok Post.

On the other hand, generally low level of English, even at college and university level. Six years of English at school and yet students manage to learn very little. Unable to hold a simple conversation or to say the simplest things. Poor performance in TOEFL, compared with the rest of S-E Asia.

Why is this?

What can be done to remedy the situation?)

The historical background.

Thailand, unlike India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore, not colonized by the British. Educated people in those countries speak fluent, cultivated English because British imposed it on their cultures. Any Indian, Malay or Singaporean who wanted to make his way in the world in the colonial era, had to learn the language of the colonizers. English is deeply entrenched in the educational systems of these countries. The same is true of those countries

¹ Lecturer of International Business Management Curriculum Eastern Asia University

colonized by the French, Spanish and Portuguese. In India, the home of about a hundred different languages, English is a convenient lingua franca that helps people of a very diverse country communicate.

Thai does not resemble English in any way. English comes from a Northern European Germanic language family and has a complexity of verb tenses and structures. Thai does not have tenses as such. The tense of a sentence is indicated by a time expression. Many languages derive a great deal of vocabulary from Latin (English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese) and this enables the speakers of these languages to immediately recognize a lot of vocab in other Latin-based languages. Thai, however, has no basis in Latin.

Cultural Factors

Thailand only recently has really opened to the outside world (onset of econ. development 1960 onwards) Fear of making mistakes in public, loss of face, shyness. Excessive respect for teachers, never asking questions, never querying anything the teacher says. Old-fashioned teaching methods which require the st to be passive in the classroom, to absorb everything the teacher tells him and then to regurgitate it in an exam. No attempt to engage the st in the learning process, no attempt to develop the st's capacity for critical thought. Spoonfeeding. Does not encourage or compel st to search for information.

Tarzan and Jane English prevalent in Thailand.

The Prevailing Language Teaching Methodologies in Thailand

1. Megaphone Teaching

Experience in school in North Bangkok.

Faults:

- a) Too many sts
- b) Sts Not very engaged in the lesson.
- c) Infrequency of teaching
- d) Not enough time devoted to English for any real progress to be made.

2. Grammar - Translation Approach to Language Learning

- Develops reading and writing skills, neglects speaking and listening skills
- Relies on translation
 - A) Student doesn't have to think for himself, just waits for the teacher to translate.
 - B) Student is not really getting into the other language, he's continually thinking in his own language
- Language learning not related to use. Eg Sts learn the Present Perfect tense, how to form it etc. but are never shown how to use it. Not communicative. St learns a language structure but doesn't learn how to use it.
- Too much teacher talking time (TTT), not enough students talking time. (STT)

Time Problems

1. Teaching English for 3hour chunks, once a week
 - Too long for Sts to maintain concentration.
 - need more than one talking head
 - ignores the frequency factor, important for reinforcing learning.
 - Sts often expected to absorb basic structures of language in one or two semesters. Unrealistic. (Quote St Theresa experience)

Good language learning consists of establishing a foundation, so that the Sts know the basic structures and tenses of the language This must be firmly established, before one moves on to more complex material Don't start building the walls until the floor is secure

Some proposals and Suggestions to Ameliorate the Present Situation

1 Get our Students talking!

Anyone who is learning a language should be able to speak and understand the language These are basic skills!

- Pairs practice (cue card)
- Role-play sits
- Picture stories

These techniques all get students talking Work in pairs, answering questions

2. Teach communicatively

Examples:

a) Simple past and Present Perfect /Perfect continuous used to denote finished and unfinished actions

b) Going to – talking about future plans and intentions.

Functional approaches to language teaching.

3. Don't translate!

Ignores Chomsky's LAD (Language acquisition device) theory

Make students start to think in their language, not merely translating. Cuts down Interference.

4 Don't worry about mistakes!

Making mistakes are an essential part of learning a language (of learning anything!)

Get in the water and start swimming! Chorusing group work, role play where students are working together, and where attention is not upon them Make contact and converse with English native speakers whenever possible

5. Don't neglect listening

- comprehension from cassettes

- Pop music

- watch and try to understand movies with English dialogue and Thai sub-titles

6. Test oral and listening skills in exams

7. Get our Sts interested in the cultures that underlie the English Language.

