

# The Current Issues of Teaching English in Thai Context

## ประเด็นปัญหาในปัจจุบันของการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในบริบทไทย

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to point out the current issues of teaching English in Thai context. The author gathered the current issues and commented on what is happening in teaching and learning English in Thailand in various dimensions. The distinct issues included the reform of English language curriculum in Thailand based on three main factors. The first factor includes language teaching context, methods, and the social context of education. The second is the issue of power and inequality linked to the dominance of English as a Foreign Language and the language of instruction in the Thai context. The last is a general discussion on critical applied linguistics in relation to language teaching, as well as critical sociolinguistics in terms of socio-political issues related to language education in the Thai context. The result of the problem has led to efforts to improve the English language teaching methods in the Thai curriculum. Another purpose in writing this article is to make the policy-makers and the educators involved in the teaching and learning of English in Thailand to be aware of problems and help to find solutions to improve their English language knowledge level and the abilities of the Thai students.

**Keywords:** Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Teaching pedagogy, English language Teaching (ELT)

### บทคัดย่อ

จุดประสงค์ของบทความนี้คือการแสดงให้เห็นถึงประเด็นปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นในปัจจุบันของการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษที่อยู่ในบริบทไทย ผู้เขียนได้รวบรวมประเด็นปัญหาและแสดงความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับสิ่งที่เกิดขึ้นในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษของประเทศไทยในหลายแง่มุมด้วยกัน อาทิ การปฏิรูปหลักสูตรการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย ซึ่งประกอบไปด้วยปัจจัย 3 ประการคือ เนื้อหาของการเรียนการสอน วิธีการของการเรียนการสอน รวมถึง บริบททางด้านสังคมของการศึกษา ประเด็นปัญหาต่างๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับอำนาจและความไม่เท่าเทียมกันในสังคมที่มีผลเชื่อมโยงต่อภาวะที่ถูกครอบงำของภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะที่เป็นภาษาต่างชาติและการเรียนการสอนภาษาในบริบทไทย และการอภิปรายในเรื่องของภาษาศาสตร์ประยุกต์เชิงวิพากษ์ที่มีความสัมพันธ์กับการสอนภาษารวมถึงภาษาศาสตร์สังคมเชิงวิพากษ์ใน

แง่ของประเด็นปัญหาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสังคมและการเมืองที่มีผลต่อการศึกษาภาษาในบริบทไทย ผลของประเด็นปัญหาได้ส่งผลทำให้เกิดความพยายามในการปรับปรุงเปลี่ยนแปลงวิธีการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในหลักสูตรของไทย อีกจุดประสงค์หนึ่งของการเขียนบทความนี้ก็คือ การทำความเข้าใจกับผู้ที่มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องกับการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทยให้ได้ตระหนักถึงประเด็นปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นและช่วยกันหาแนวทางแก้ไขเพื่อพัฒนาระดับความรู้และความสามารถทางด้านภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนไทย

**คำสำคัญ:** การสอนภาษาเพื่อการสื่อสาร, ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะที่เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ, วิธีการสอน, การสอนภาษาอังกฤษ



## Introduction

It cannot be denied that Thai students spend twelve years studying English in primary and secondary schools, but the results are somewhat unsatisfactory. In addition, it is unavoidably seen that Thai students' English proficiency and learners' performance are relatively low (Khamkhien, 2010). From those results, in recent times, there has been an increasing emphasis on English taught in schools to enhance learners' English language competency and to serve the needs of international communication in Thailand. To solve the failure of English teaching and learning in Thailand, substantial efforts have been made to bring about changes especially in these three aspects including language teaching context, methods, and social context of education to better prepare students in this multicultural and interdependent world. According to Suwannoppharat and Chinokul (2015), identifying the context and selecting the most appropriate approach for supporting students' learning are the main responsibilities of efficient EFL teachers.

Why does English have to be greatly emphasized on the new curriculum in Thailand? The answer is that English is still being used as lingua franca and it is seemingly used more than other languages in the field of business, education, science and so on. Apart from

the new curriculum, in accordance with multicultural and interdependent world, especially in teaching context, Thai teachers are supposed to use English as the medium of instruction and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) should be applied in the classrooms to improve learners' English language proficiency to support the education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to support the multicultural markets in this era.

## The Reform of English Language Curriculum in Thailand

As previously stated, nowadays substantial efforts have been made to the reform of English language curriculum in Thailand such as implementing English courses early in year 1, giving fund to develop English teachers and adopting the communicative teaching approach used in the English classes; however, Thai learners' English performance does not meet the standard required. Regarding grade 12 students, the average English score on the national test is also not satisfactory (NIETS, 2016). This is because, in the author's view, for teaching context, it is very important for English being used as the medium of instruction instead of Thai and teachers should get more chances to develop themselves than being stuck with their overload

of teaching and responsibilities. According to Baker (2008), the problems in English teaching in Thai classroom were worsen by an overall perceived inadequacy in the level of English of Thai ELT teachers who are unqualified and poorly-trained with dry teaching styles that overly focus on grammatical details, which results in Thai being the predominantly spoken language in the English classroom. As a consequence of the lack of English proficiency, problems arise in implementing more communicatively orientated language classrooms. Obviously, it is extremely difficult for Thai learners to master the English language in terms of speaking and listening. This is because the medium of instruction in the classroom is mostly Thai and many teachers teaching English to Thai learners are mainly non-native speakers in all levels of education. Also, some teachers have insufficient English language skills and cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the university entrance examination systems which only examine reading skills and grammar knowledge have led to a neglect of other skills in the classroom, especially the productive skills of writing and speaking. These factors are supposed to be responsible for Thai learners' inefficiency in English Communication. These mentioned obstacles seem relevant to the notion of Lohatepanont (2017) who proposed that Thai education needs to transformation based on many poor outcomes such as poor English language teaching, education inequality and inequality in higher education.

In Thailand, English is considered a foreign language, and is used for the purposes of academic advancement, career advancement, and traveling abroad. Khamkhien (2010) states that to cope with the growing local and international demand, a number of efforts from all parties involved have been made to the Thai

educational system to help boost Thai learners' English performance. Unaree (2019) claims that the reform of a new English learning and teaching policy in the basic education system in 2017 transformed the grammar-translation method to CLT, starting from listening, speaking, reading, and writing, respectively. For language pedagogical context, learner-centered methods such as practical experience, independent work, autonomous learning, and self-access should be more encouraged than the traditional teacher-centered ones and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) should be applied in the classrooms because in Thailand, the speaking skill is a critical part of language learning and the teaching process. Traditionally, Thai EFL teachers employ the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods in English classroom. This leads to the use of unnatural language and create the failure of interaction in the language classroom. Also, Thai learners in general have few chances to interact with English native speakers since English in Thailand is taught as a foreign language. The exposure to English of Thai learners is somewhat limited because English instruction is located in an area where English is not a primary language. That is why at the present time a lot of schools especially in urban area try to replicate the target language environment through bilingual programs and computer-assisted teaching

To bring about changes in the teaching method, grammar translation is no good because it doesn't expose students to the real use of language, so CLT should be better because it gets students to speak without worrying too much about the grammatical mistakes. However, in Thailand it is believed that CLT often fails to create sufficient opportunities for real interaction in the language classroom. This is because most

of the Thai teachers are not familiar with the aural-oral method of CLT and they would emphasize grammatical competence and provide learners with pattern drills and rote memorization of isolated sentences, creating incorrect language forms and limiting authentic speaking activities (Saengboon, 2004). To solve this problem, teachers should gradually try to change the interaction in their classrooms that is mostly teacher-dominated to become student-centered by implementing communicative activities in those classrooms. It is fairly deemed that CLT is the key approach supporting ELT in Thailand to prepare Thai learners for the changing world. Furthermore, to enhance listening and speaking skills, a summer camp should be set up yearly for students to give them a chance to use English as the mean of communication during the camp time.

Moreover, in order to solve the teachers' insufficient English language skills as well as cultural knowledge to use English as the medium of instruction, there should be enough training courses for teachers living in remote areas who lacks knowledge about teaching pedagogy. The government and relevant education authorities must provide education and professional development of high quality to teachers. Besides, teachers should be provided more forums to interact because of ELT context in Thailand to day – lack of efficient English teachers since they have no opportunity to study abroad. If teachers have more chances to interact, exchange and disseminate their teaching techniques; as a result, they can adapt and apply the best technique that is suitable for their students.

As it can be seen that a lot of EFL teachers do not see the importance of research or link between the research and their teaching practice. As a result, more action research should

be conducted to enhance teaching techniques. Various efficient EFL teachers have tried out to do some research concerning the problems of English language learning and teaching in Thailand. Then the knowledge and the result from the research has been dissimilated to public in both national and international conference. Also, textbooks based on the outcome of the study have been written to suggest ways to solve the problems weakening Thai students' English proficiency. It is absolutely believed that this can extremely bring about changes in English language teaching context in Thailand, especially the teachers' proficiency and efficiency as well as students' English performance.

As we can see that there are a large number of problems and obstacles in developing and improving ELT in Thailand, a lot of English language teachers in the 21 century, have attempted to put more efforts to bring about changes in English language teaching context and methods by applying more teaching approaches to help learners learn language effectively such as task-based instruction, content-based approach as well as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). To solve these problems, teachers have gradually tried to change the interaction in classrooms that is mostly teacher-dominated to become student-centered by implementing communicative activities in those classrooms. Further, teachers have devoted more time to select and prepare materials for interactive activities that would match the learners' speaking ability and content. In order to enhance learners' speaking and listening competence, teachers have connected the topics in the materials to what learners have already known in terms of their language skills, personal lives, and real-world situations. Last but not least, the Thai education

system needs a change of focus in the methods of teaching and assessment employed especially at the level tertiary. To change the traditional teaching method, short- and long-term training should be offered to all those who are involved in the teaching and learning process. At present, educators are becoming increasingly concerned with the efficiency of their teaching and testing methods. Many educators have suggested that a new approach is required, so active learning and continuous assessment methods have been introduced to modern pedagogical theory and practice. In Thailand, as part of the reform of instructional practice in higher education, teachers are expected to be equipped with the theoretical concepts and practical activities involved in active learning and continuous assessment. It is strongly believed that CLT and active learning as well as continuous assessment are the key approaches supporting ELT in Thailand to prepare Thai learners for the changing world. As mentioned earlier, those stated problems have been attributable to the unsatisfactory results of English language teaching. To solve the problems involving students who wish to speak English fluently, Thai EFL teachers have tried to give opportunities and encourage students to use English in their daily lives to make them be familiar with communicating in English to avoid being too shy to speak English with their classmates. To reduce passive and poorly-motivated learners as well as learners who lack responsibility for their own learning, a lot of universities such as Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University and Kasetsart University have created challenging English lessons that suit for our Thai learners and contexts instead of commercial books that sometimes are not proper for Thai learners and context. It is believed that

the challenging and interesting English lessons can motivate and attract them to study and acquire the English language no more or less.

For social context of education, according to Geringer (2003), the most important factor in student learning progress is the teachers, and teacher quality outweighs other factors such as motivation, funding, and class sizes. It is absolutely believed that qualified teachers can create the best environment for learning. It can be said that students do not use English perhaps because teachers do not want to use it (Phothongsunan, 2019). According to Norton (2000), using English involves power relations. Learners would not have an opportunity to practice using English if teachers do not realize that they hold power to influence learners to speak or use English. Teachers' lack of enthusiasm to use English in the classroom seems to highlight the indecisive role of English in an EFL context. Moreover, for Thai education system especially at the secondary level at the present time, there is a shortage of teachers of English because graduates who majored in English love to work in other higher salary jobs such as flight attendants, or in hotel and tourism businesses, or with international companies. It is not surprising that those qualified English major graduates do not prefer working in the educational field because of the meager salary. As a result, it tends to be that we have only relatively non-qualified ones. The minister of Ministry of education should call for the higher salary for teaching career. It absolutely believed that more salary can attract some expertise language graduates to become teachers in order to be the major forces to improve ELT in Thailand in the future. In addition to the lower salary, teachers these days are required to teach effectively in

challenging environments; to make effective use of information and communications technology (ICT) in their teaching; to conduct research aimed at improving the quality of their teaching; and to deal effectively with administrative tasks - all of which to meet up with the requirements for 'Quality Assurance.' Last but not least, 'Quality Assurance' that causes overloaded and useless burden for the teachers should be abolished to let them have more time to develop and improve materials and methods for their lessons and have more chances for their professional development.

#### **Issues of Power and Inequality Linked to the Dominance of English as a Foreign Language and Language of Instruction in Thai context**

"English is being used as a powerful tool to bring the world to Thailand and Thailand to the world" (Saengboon, 2002, p. 33) reflects that in Thailand learning English is now a matter of necessity. Similar to other parts of the world, English is represented modernization and power (Phillipson, 1992). Technological knowledge and development information can be accessed through English language. Thailand is not the exception of the case. Entrepreneurs in Thailand tend to recruit only the candidates possessing high command of English language. In addition, it is unavoidably seen that English is the main linguistic tool to strengthen national and international economic advantages of the country. From this notion, it can be inferred that those who have more English proficiency can have more power and privilege than those who do not. As Pennycook (1994, p. 158) put, "English is the gatekeepers for wealth and prestige."

More specifically to language pedagogical context, it is clear that there is a link between

the issue of power and inequality and teaching EFL in Thailand. In order to discuss the issues of language teaching in Thailand including, EFL, medium for instruction, and power and inequalities in teaching language, it cannot be avoided considering the root of these issues which are always overlooked. They are namely school policy, inadequacy of the decentralization of expertise English teachers to rural or remote areas, and the selection of the main medium for instruction. As stated above, English is considered the most powerful language in accessing power, prestige, status, and socio-economic mobility. However, to challenge the traditional notions of teaching this powerful language, English, and to decrease social equalities of language pedagogy are not the easy jobs. Regarding such issues, there are several issues come into play. For one thing, there is a huge gap among schools such as urban and rural schools, private and public schools, and monolingual and bilingual schools. In addition to the different amount of budget provided for these schools to afford the salary of English native speaker teachers or Thai teachers with the high proficiency in English materials, media, and sources provided for the schools to facilitate learning and teaching are also the crucial issues. In short, financial readiness affects the quality of English language instruction of the school. Consequently, it seems that students studying in urban area or in schools using English as language of instruction tend to gain more English language competency and proficiency than those in abandoned area.

As previously stated, the power and inequality issue related to the dominance of EFL and language of instruction should not be overlooked because it helps investigate how and why English is given a privileged position, and how the study and use of English can support

the powerful individuals maintain their political and economic control. According to the critical work of Mahboob & Paltridge (2013), this can help illuminate significant concerns of this issue because it states that one key of critical language policy studies has been in examining the role, function, and power of English worldwide. From this point of view, it can be realized that English is a global language as it is used worldwide. The countries where English is the mother tongue tends to gain more privileges and people who are fluent in English are viewed superior. Moreover, English relates to national and economic development. It is also the language of diplomacy, education, finance, globalization, science, technology, tourism, and so forth. As a result, nearly all countries across the world including Thailand introducing English in all schools and attempt to adopt English as the language of instruction to empower themselves and their students. However, this issue is hardly successful because of the inequality issues in ELT in rural area schools as mentioned.

#### **A general discussion on critical applied linguistics in relation to language teaching as well as critical sociolinguistics in terms of socio-political issues related to language education in Thai context**

It cannot be denied that language teaching has been a domain often considered to be the principal concern of applied linguistics that focuses on solving social problems involving language such as how to teach language better, how to create teaching books and teaching materials, how to make an effective language examination, how to prepare English language teachers and learners for the changes proposed for the 21st century, how to determine the literacy levels of a whole population and so

on. It can be said that applied linguistics often emphasizes on language users and language use especially in the study of second and foreign language learning and teaching as well as the study of language and linguistics in relation to practical problems. Due to practical problems, social problems connected with language such as unemployment, illiteracy, pedagogy and so on interest the linguists; these critical issues invoke critical applied linguistics.

Before critical applied linguistics in relation to language teaching is discussed, it is very crucial to know what critical applied linguistics (CALx) is. Pennycook (2001) claims that it is a critical approach to applied linguistics. For him, critical applied linguistics is a way of thinking and doing, a “continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action.” According to Poster (1989), as cited in Pennycook (2001, p. 7), “critical applied linguistics is an approach to language-related questions that springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain and that applied linguistics may have an important role in either the production or the alleviation of some of that pain.” Language in social contexts that is farther than correlations between language and society is explored by critical applied linguistics opening up a new set of questions, concerns, and issues such as identity, sexuality ethics, desire, access, and difference (Suwanarak, n.d.). Critical applied linguistics studies ways in which education, language study and language use relate to the realization and the distribution of power in society. It is believed that power is constructed and exercised through language that can empower the individual who can use it effectively and properly.

Critical applied linguistics relates to language teaching. Pennycook (1989) argues that

language teaching approaches are not neutral, but rather reflect “a particular view of the world and are articulated in the interest of unequal power relationships” (pp. 589-90). Language teaching is not only about methods but also about teachers’ ability to operate their teaching that leads to desired learning. That is to say, teachers are much more interested in helping students achieve the goals that are important to them and less in the method used to do this. It can be seen that there are different kinds of students such as primary students, secondary students, university students as well as adult students. These students have different goals in studying English. As a result, the same methods shouldn’t be used to teach them. Teachers have tried the best to help them achieve their goals by creating the suitable and effective ways of teaching for them. For young students, they are always concerned with their scores and their grade point average. As we realize that Thai education is exam center, so their goals and desired learning are passing the exam and getting the good grades. Consequently, focusing on what they will face in their exams to fulfill their goals is more important. On the contrary, for the adult students who already graduated from university but cannot communicate well in English both speaking and writing, they should be taught by emphasizing on speaking and writing skill not overly focusing on grammar to help them develop communicative competence to use successfully in their work. Apart from language teaching approach, critical applied linguistics is interested in marginalization. According to Martin & Rose (2008), to empower students from disadvantaged communities, they need to be explicitly taught the language and discourse of power. They also point out that the skills required to produce written texts are not equally available to students

from minority or marginalized groups. We can also see this inequality in Thailand. It is clearly seen that language teaching in Bangkok schools is much better than in the countryside because the government pays more attention on the schools in Bangkok than in the remote areas. According to Sondergaard (2017), to prepare Thai children for a competitive workforce and to regain the competitive edge Thailand’s economy, it will be important for more children to be equipped with stronger problem solving, analytical reasoning and English language skills. Lathapipat (2017), stated that all Thai children, wherever they live and whether their families are poor or rich, deserve a fair chance in life -- an opportunity to receive a quality education as good as what is provided in Bangkok, or better. The government supports more advanced technology and more skillful English teachers for schools in Bangkok than in the upcountry. As a result, students in Bangkok always have higher proficiency in English than students in other remote provinces.

As we can see that critical applied linguistics plays very vital role to language teaching, we should not overlook critical sociolinguistics in terms of socio-political issues, since it significantly relates to language education. Before examining how critical sociolinguistics in terms of socio-political issues relates to language education, it is very necessary to understand what critical sociolinguistics is. Pennycook (2001, p. 7) states that “critical sociolinguistics is concerned with a critique of ways in which language perpetuates inequitable social relations.” According to Mey (1985), as cited in Pennycook (2001, p. 37), “critical sociolinguistics seeks to recognize the political and economic distortions that our society imposes on us. It attempts to explain the differences between oppressed and

oppressor language by pointing out that the different classes have unequal access to social power.” Critical sociolinguistic is concerned with a critique of ways in which language can convey social power. Language can produce social relations. For example, in Thailand, it is clearly seen that the individuals who have a good command in writing and speaking English tends to have more power and privilege in society than the individuals who cannot communicate in English.

As mentioned earlier, critical socio linguistics in terms of socio-political issues related to language education should not be overlooked because it investigates how and why certain languages especially English are given a privileged position, and how the study and use of English helps the powerful individuals maintain their political and economic control. Mahboob & Paltridge (2013) states that one key of critical language policy studies has been in examining the role, function, and power of English worldwide. From this point of view, it can be realized that English is as a global language and it is used as a worldwide language privileging country where English is spoken as a native language and position people who can use the language proficiently in a more powerful position. Moreover, English relates to national and economic development. It is also the language of diplomacy, education, finance, globalization, science, technology, tourism, and so forth. As a result, nearly all countries across the world including Thailand introducing English in all schools and at earlier grades. Nowadays, in Thai education system, students can have a chance to study English since they are in kindergarten level but in the past English was introduced particularly in public school in Prathom 5, approximately 8 years later than today. However, it can be observed that students at the present time

show no marked differences from students in the past in term of English language proficiency even though they have much more time to study English in school. It is very interesting to figure out why this phenomenon has happened. It might have been the conservative method of teaching that some teachers tend to overly focus on structure and grammar and not let students to communicate and share their opinions. It seems to be “Teacher Center”. Most students just sit and study passively. They don’t have any motivation to study English just studying it to pass their curriculum or degree. Another reason may come from much more burdens that teachers at the present time have. They have to do a lot of paper work annually to fulfill Office of the Higher Education Commission and Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessments (Public Organization) for Self-Assessment Report (SAR). As a result, they do not have enough time to develop their method of teaching and materials and they also do not have enough time to enhance their knowledge and skills. This can be an example of the failure of our education policy that affects language teaching and language education no more or less.

In the author’s view, Thailand’s English language policy followed the CLT principles is fine. However, the policy makers should concern with the implementation of the CLT-based policy because a lot of Thai teachers could have different ideas of CLT. After all, when English is taught, all aspects of the language will need to be focused. Teachers should consider immediate needs and wants of their students while they are teaching. For example, if students want to be able to read academic materials, teachers should focus on sentence elements, vocabulary items and paragraphs and long passages. Focusing

on listening and speaking could not help them read successfully. It seems a waste of time for both the students and the teacher themselves. Whatever the policy is, the teacher must get to the point on what their students need and stay focusing on what the teachers themselves will need to accomplish. Importantly, it could always be saved for the teachers to refer to the course description and syllabus as well.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the fact that ELT and English language proficiency in Thailand are at the relatively low level, this is because of teachers' overloaded burden which causes their teaching styles start to fossilize into rote-learning, teaching grammar and translation with Thai as the medium of instruction, teacher-centered classroom activities, spoon-feeding, and so on. In addition, for the new language curriculum, it is time to focus on both teaching English for specific purpose and teaching culture. To bring about changes for teaching context, methods and social context of education to make them better, it will be helpful a lot if the teachers' overloaded responsibilities and tasks are reduced and they get enough support for their professional development. It is very important that teachers should be keen to search for the most appropriate approach to teach English to Thai learners in order that their English performance

meets the international demands, and they are able to fully and successfully participate in the international community and the independent world, ELT and Thai learners' performance will absolutely better in the near future.

The problems of power and inequality linked to the dominance of EFL and language of instruction in Thailand cannot be ceased unless the government sincerely and seriously tries to solve these problems by stopping providing any advantages to specific parties, that is to say urban area schools only. The government should consider the more profitable income and pay more attention to schools in remote area and provide them the same amount and quality of teaching materials and instructional media as well as efficient teacher resources.

Finally, both critical applied linguistics in relation to language teaching and critical sociolinguistics in terms of socio-political issues related to language education, are very important for language teaching and language education because critical applied linguistics describes and seeks to change inequities that are related to policies and practices of language whereas critical sociolinguistics in terms of socio-political issues related to language education concerns language-in-education policy that reflects the language policy of each country.



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