



English Language Teaching in AEC Era: A Case Study of Universities in the Upper Northern Region of Thailand

การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในยุคประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน: กรณีศึกษามหาวิทยาลัยในภาคเหนือตอนบนของประเทศไทย

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Abstract

English language teaching has often been influenced by uncontrollable factors ranging from national policies to regional policies. The implementation of AEC has brought not only opportunities to many professions in ASEAN, but also some perceived challenges for graduates and English instructors in Thailand. This case study aimed to explore university instructors' opinions on and suggestions toward current English language teaching and learning in higher education regarding the actual implementation of AEC. Fifty-five English instructors from eight government universities and three private universities in upper northern region of Thailand participated in this case study. Questionnaires and semi-structure interviews were used to collect the data. Descriptive statistics were used for the quantitative data analysis, and thematic analyses were used to analyze the qualitative data. The results revealed that current teaching approaches are not effective enough to prepare students for AEC; in addition, curriculum and programs need to be revised to emphasize English communication skills as the context of labour market has changed. Several pedagogical approaches, such as English for Specific Purposes, Field study, practicum program, and project-based learning were suggested to prepare Thai students for AEC.

Keywords

English Language Teaching, AEC, ASEAN, Higher Education

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บทคัดย่อ

การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษได้รับผลกระทบจากปัจจัยที่ควบคุมไม่ได้ตั้งแต่นโยบายระดับชาติ ถึงระดับภูมิภาคจากการเปิดเสรีเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน (AEC) ซึ่งไม่เพียงแต่เพิ่มโอกาสในการทำงานให้กับหลากหลายอาชีพในภูมิภาคอาเซียน แต่ยังนำมาซึ่งความท้าทายต่าง ๆ ที่จะเกิดขึ้นกับบัณฑิตและอาจารย์ผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษาชิ้นนี้ได้ศึกษาทัศนะและข้อเสนอแนะของอาจารย์มหาวิทยาลัยเกี่ยวกับการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในระดับอุดมศึกษาในปัจจุบันที่เกี่ยวโยงกับการเปิดเสรีเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน อย่างเป็นทางการ อาจารย์ 55 ท่าน จากสถาบันของรัฐบาลและเอกชนในเขตภาคเหนือตอนบนของประเทศไทย ได้เข้าร่วมในงานวิจัยในครั้งนี้ เครื่องมือในการเก็บข้อมูล คือ แบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง จากนั้นนำข้อมูลที่ได้มาวิเคราะห์โดยใช้สถิติเชิงพรรณนาในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณและใช้การวิเคราะห์แก่นสาระสำหรับการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพ ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่ารูปแบบการสอนในปัจจุบันยังไม่มีประสิทธิภาพเพียงพอต่อการเตรียมนักศึกษาสำหรับประเทศไทยเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนนัก นอกจากนี้หลักสูตรและแผนการศึกษาจำเป็นต้องได้รับการปรับปรุงโดยมุ่งเน้นทักษะการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษเนื่องจากบริบทของตลาดแรงงานได้เปลี่ยนไป และได้มีการเสนอรูปแบบการจัดการเรียนการสอนที่หลากหลายเพื่อเตรียมความพร้อมนักศึกษาไทยกับ AEC เช่น ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัฒนธรรมสังคมเชิงพัฒนาการศึกษาภาคสนาม การฝึกงานและการจัดการเรียนรู้แบบใหม่ในงานเป็นฐาน เป็นต้น

คำสำคัญ

การสอนภาษาอังกฤษ ประเทศไทยเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน

สมาคมประชาชาติแห่งเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ (อาเซียน) การศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษา

Introduction

In August 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in Bangkok, and currently there are ten nations having joined the community. The community aims to promote collaborations between the ten member countries (The ASEAN Declaration, (2016). The decision to establish by 2020 the ASEAN Community, including the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), was made in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II in Bali, Indonesia, on 7 October 2003 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was declared to be the goal of regional economic integration. In addition to the AEC, the other two pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), are expected to work in tandem in establishing the ASEAN Community by 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). In fact, the implementation of AEC has begun in 2015.



Among the three pillars, the AEC is considered to have great effects on national policy and system since the pillar mainly concerns economic development, social development, and protection of peace and stability among the member countries which are the foundations of developments of each country (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). As a member of ASEAN, Thailand is inevitably affected by the ASEAN Concord II. Over the past few years, there have been many movements in Thailand's education system, but one that has been discussed widely is the preparation of Thailand's education for the actual implementation of AEC in 2015.

It has been stated that the implementation of AEC offers new opportunity for graduates and employees due to the free flow of workforces within the member nations (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014 ; Pyakurel, 2014). In order to facilitate the communication among the ten countries, English was declared to be the sole working language of AEC in 2007, according to Article 34 of The ASEAN Charter (Kirkpatrick, 2008). Such declaration not only highlights the significant roles of English in the region, but it also creates impacts on the English language policy and education in Thailand. English language proficiency has become a required qualification for most careers and, with the free flow of labours inside the AEC, employers seem to be able to select the most qualified employees who are the best for job positions from any member countries (Bunwirat & Chuaphalakit, 2016). As a result, AEC has been considered both a great opportunity and a challenge to the nations as a whole. Moreover, AEC has been addressed as one of the main factors which has influenced Thailand's educational policy and practice in terms of preparing our workers to be a part of AEC and to be competitive in the international labour market (Bunwirat & Chuaphalakit, 2016 ; Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014).

Higher education is seen as a key mechanism to equip graduates with professional skills and English language competency (Bunwirat & Chuaphalakit, 2016). Nevertheless, studies have found that despite several years of planning and preparation for AEC, Thai people still have less proficiency of English communication than people from other ASEAN member countries (Barbin & Nicholls, 2013 ; Choomthong, 2014 ; Deerajviset, 2014 ; Pyakurel, 2014). Several studies point out that low qualified teachers, low-motivation learners, large class sizes, and students' minimal exposure to English are the main factors of the failure of English language teaching in Thailand (Dhanasobhon, n.d.; Noom-ura, 2013). In addition, teachers' heavy workload also hinders the effectiveness of teaching since the teachers mostly apply traditional teaching styles into English language classrooms such as grammar-translation method, teacher-centered approach, and using Thai as the medium language of instruction (Noom-ura, 2013). Two productive skills of

English such as speaking and writing are highlighted as Thai university students' weaknesses since they still have difficulties of communication in English especially in real life situations (Suwanarak & Phothongsunan, 2008).

Therefore, it can be said that English language teaching in Thailand still needs improvement to produce more competent graduates and labours who are fully competitive in the AEC and wider international markets. The impacts of AEC upon ASEAN countries in several aspects have been studied and reported (Barbin, 2013 ; Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014 ; Sirikhan, 2014).

However, previous works are limited to challenges that AEC might bring to the education system in Thai higher education. There has been little discussion on the challenges that AEC might bring to English language teaching and learning in that level. Moreover, few studies have investigated English instructors' opinions and suggestions regarding the implementation of AEC and English language pedagogy in Thailand (Buwirat & Chuaphalakit, 2016). Therefore, this study was proposed to shed light on the current English language teaching in the upper northern region of Thailand by investigating the university instructors' opinions on and suggestions toward the current English language teaching and learning in AEC era. It is important to know what is still continuing and what needs to be added in terms of English language teaching and learning in higher education level. Since instructors are one of the key stakeholders in education, the investigation of university instructors' opinions on and suggestions towards English language teaching in the period of AEC would benefit the education, help create a better understanding of current English teaching and learning, and would suggest appropriate policy and planning for the current situation.

Research objectives

The study aimed to investigate the university English instructors' opinions on current English language teaching and learning in higher education regarding the actual implementation of AEC. Moreover, the study also discussed the English instructors' suggestions towards English language teaching regarding students' preparation for AEC. Thus, the two following research questions were asked in this study:

1. What are the university English instructors' opinions on English language teaching in the period of AEC?
2. What are the university English instructors' suggestions toward English language teaching regarding students' preparation for AEC?



Research Methodology

English language instructors from eight government universities and three private universities in upper northern region of Thailand were selected according to the following criteria: 1) having at least 5 years of teaching experience, 2) having experience in curriculum development and planning, and 3) holding a degree in English language teaching or education-related fields. As a result, 55 instructors were the participants in this study.

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the data collection instruments used in this study. The questionnaire consisted of three main parts: 1) 4-Point Likert Scales, 2) checklist, and 3) open-ended questions. The open-ended questions probed into the participants' opinions and suggestions toward English teaching and learning in the university level of Thailand. The questionnaire items and the interview protocols were reviewed by five experts in related field of English teaching and revised according to the experts' comments and suggestions.

After finishing the questionnaire session, each instructor who volunteered to participate in the interview session was interviewed individually for around 25-30 minutes. Eleven instructors participated in the interviews. The interviews were recorded digitally. Descriptive statistics: frequency and percentages were used for the quantitative data analysis, and thematic analyses were used to analyze the qualitative data.

Results

The results of this study are presented according to the research questions: 1) What are the university English instructors' opinions on English language teaching in the period of AEC? and 2) What are the university English instructors' suggestions toward English language teaching regarding students' preparation for AEC?

1. What are university English instructors' opinions on English language teaching in the period of AEC? According to the participants' responses in the interview, the key goals of English language education in Thailand were not totally changed from the past. Still, English communication was set as one of the crucial skills for working in the future and students should acquire it since their early school years. The participants believed that students' English language proficiency and English communication skills were the essential tools that students could use to advance their careers, especially in AEC labour market. Besides, proficiency in English and skills in communication could help students to acquire other skills and knowledge from various sources and these would enhance students' employability ("a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal

attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy". (Yorke, 2006, 3) as well. However, due to the opening of AEC that made the competition in the labour market higher, pedagogical approaches of English language teaching should be reconsidered in order to fully support students' employability. In other words, the teaching and learning of English language in higher education, according to the participants' responses, should focus on "what and how" to equip students with. General English knowledge alone was not enough to help students stay competitive in a present-day labour market.

Selected by 85.5%, 56.4%, and 38.2 % of the participants respectively, the three most important factors to the curriculum or program development planning were the content, the incorporation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and the incorporation of intercultural communication skills. In addition, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was suggested as one of the key factors to be included in curriculum planning, and knowledge that could assist students to work successfully in an international labour market, such as intercultural knowledge should be introduced to classrooms. Moreover, regardless of the curriculum planning, more than half of the participants suggested that the policy of English Program should be adapted to suit the jobs' requirements. The participants noted that knowledge of ESP would enable the students to learn beyond classroom and acquire more knowledge to help them become more proficient, increasing their employability to be competitive in the AEC market in the future.

Some of the participants' responses about the needs of proficient English speaking-workers and the significance of ESP in English teaching are shown below:

"According to the survey results of graduates and entrepreneurs' opinions toward English programs, the business sectors need students who can communicate in particular working fields. Thus, universities will take this into consideration for planning and revising English curricula in the future."

"We would provide more ESP programs for students. When they graduate, they would be able to communicate in English appropriately in their fields."

In addition, most of the participants pointed out that one way to raise Thai students' competitiveness in the labor market was emphasizing English communication skills of related working fields in classrooms. The participant said that:

"English pedagogies that enhance four skills of English: speaking, listening, reading and writing have not been changed; however, future curriculum planning



and development must emphasize the uses of language in such particular fields of working. ... Companies need workers who have English communication skills in working. So, we need more courses that enhance communication skills and focus more on ESP."

In order to enhance students' English communication skills, the participants implemented various classroom activities and learning programs, such as projected-based learning, field study, international programs, and language practicum, in their courses. Classroom activities should enable students to communicate in English and encourage them to practice in real contexts outside the classrooms as well. They explained that:

"...To enhance graduates' employability, field study program has been applied in our curriculum. We also emphasize four English skills by providing students and teachers' exchange program with international institutions. This will help the students to have chances to use more English."

"In our university, we revised English subjects of General Education curricula to stimulate non-English major students' English communicative practices and lecture in English. We set many joint projects for Thai and foreign students, working together and we also have an international dormitory. These encourage students to use English more both inside and outside classrooms."

"It is important for Thai students to get chances to use English as much as they can. Project-based learning and practicum program are examples of teaching and learning that help students use English through authentic materials and contents. In our program, we deliver English language through projects. The students use English language to accomplish the projects and this helps them to gain English proficiency. In addition, students who join a practicum program will have a chance to practice English in real situations in workplaces. These give them great experiences which they may not get in classrooms."

2. What are university English instructors' suggestions toward English language teaching regarding students' preparation for AEC? To probe into the participants' perspective toward teaching of English, the participants were asked to rate three factors that should be considered the most important in the teaching of English and should be taken into consideration for revising English

curricula in the future. The most important factors, based on the participants' responses were: the students' proficiency in the language after graduation (61.9%), the opportunity for students to practice the language (58.2%), the students' ability to use the learned target language to acquire knowledge in the future (40%). Moreover, English language curricula should be revised to achieve AEC language requirement for careers according to the participants' opinion. Language regulations of eight Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) and other specific job titles for AEC should be integrated in the new curricula of English program.

Furthermore, most of the participants suggested that English language teaching and learning should provide Thai students more exposures and opportunities to use English both inside and outside classrooms. Using English only in classrooms could not provide enough exposure to the authentic use of English language; as a result, students did not have sufficient practices to increase their English communication competence.

Most of the participants were also concerned about Thai students' characteristics which were too passive in classrooms, and their low awareness of the importance of English language. According to the participants' real teaching experience, being passive and low-motivation learners seriously hindered Thai students' English learning. Furthermore, Thai students seemed to overlook the job opportunities in the AEC labor market. One of the participants explained that:

"Thai students seem to be passive learners. They have had low motivation in English learning since they were young. It is difficult to change such a negative attitude toward English in their adulthood. Moreover, they are not aware that they may have to work with foreigners or even to work abroad. They overlook AEC and ASEAN labor market. They believe if they are going to work in Thailand, English language is unnecessary for them."

To raise students' awareness toward the significance of English and prepare them for AEC, several plans for English teaching and learning were suggested by the participants such as:

"The department hopes students are independent learners and ready for AEC. Therefore, many English courses which offer English practices for students appear as core subjects and elective subjects in the curricula. Students use the language through engaging in classroom activities or presenting their works to class."



“...In classrooms, giving lectures is not enough. Teachers must provide opportunities for students to communicate in English. If they keep practicing, we hope they can communicate English effectively when they graduate.”

Besides, the knowledge of ASEAN cultures should be integrated into language curricula. The participants' responses regarding this issue are shown below.

“The university is considering adding cultural contents of ASEAN members into some other subjects. Moreover, ASEAN cultural knowledge will be one of the subjects in GE courses for students in the near future.”

“We should integrate ASEAN information into lessons. The cultural contents may be introduced as reading passages.”

“Students' cultural awareness should be raised since the issue is significant for their future. Cultural knowledge will reduce misunderstanding in doing business in the diverse cultures of AEC.”

However, the ASEAN contexts appearing in course books should not be limited to basic information, such as geography, national flags, food, costumes, and other general information. Some participants also suggested that Community of Practice (COP), socializing, business manners and politics of each ASEAN country member should be introduced to classrooms because the knowledge is crucial for students' work in the future.

Discussion

In preparation of Thai students for AEC labour market, according to the participants, English communication skills were highlighted as essential skills for the students, and they really needed to be developed. In other words, English language learning goals in classrooms had been shifted to focus on students' four English communication skills in a particular domain, that was, workplaces rather than general daily conversation. Universities were aware of preparing students for a particular business environment. Therefore, effective pedagogical approaches and activities believed to enhance students' English communication skills had been taken into consideration of the curricular planning and revision. The participants addressed that ESP, project-based learning,

field study, language practicum, and international programs could assist students to develop English language competency. The results from the questionnaires and the interviews revealed that these approaches and activities were needed as they allowed students to use and practice English outside classrooms, and they could help increase students' exposure to the authentic context of English language usage. According to the participants, using English only in classrooms was not enough for students to improve their communication skills.

According to the participants' view, teaching English should be directed toward Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and delivered through the context of some particular fields of careers that are important for students' employability in the future. This is correspond to Deerajviset's (2014) study which indicates that CLT should be applied in English teaching in Thailand as the pedagogical approach aiming to develop students' effective communication skills. Moreover, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was suggested by the participants to be integrated into English classrooms to give students chances to use English in authentic contexts. Chomthong (2014, 54) explains that English in the ASEAN community is "English in the workplace and English for social usage". Therefore, English language teaching should emphasize these principles.

To increase students' employability for AEC, knowledge of ASEAN cultures should be equipped to Thai students. The results from the questionnaire revealed that the participants put emphasis on the content of the English subjects and cultures of ASEAN countries should not be neglected. In business situations, the knowledge of cultures will help workers to be more successful (Suttipun, 2012). Furthermore, integrating ASEAN cultures into English language curriculum is able to raise students' awareness of ASEAN and lower students' anxiety about using English in classrooms and in real contexts (Deerajviset, 2014 ; Kirkpatrick, 2008). In addition, some features of English varieties in ASEAN, such as similarities and contrarieties of English linguistic features, should be introduced to the curriculum (Kirkpatrick, 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The implementation of AEC has several effects on Thailand's education, especially in English language teaching due to the declaration to use English as a sole official business language of ASEAN in 2007. Moreover, AEC has created a free-flow of workforce which heightens the competition in ASEAN labour market. Workers who are able to communicate in English effectively have more chance to get a better job than those who are less efficient (Bunwirat & Chuaphalakit, 2016 ; Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014). This phenomenon concerns Thai higher-education instructors

about the quality of graduates. Current practices of English teaching and suggestions toward the development and revision of English curricula were made to prepare Thai students to reach the qualifications of the labour market. In particular, communication skills, teaching approaches and the content of English subjects were the primary concerns found in this study. However, the study only explored the situations and points of view from the higher-education instructors' perspectives. Further studies that probe into the points of view from the business sectors could yield valuable insights toward the quality of graduates needed for local and international market.

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