

English Language Education in Thailand: What Should Be Done

Janpha Thadphoothon¹ and Soisithorn Isarankura²

¹Business English program, International College,
Dhurakij Pundit University, Thailand
Email: janpha.tha@dpu.ac.th

²College of International Business, Rattana Bundit University, Thailand
Email: soisithorn_is@rbac.ac.th

Received 09/08/23 Revised 08/10/23 Accepted 27/12/23

Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges facing English language education in Thailand and offers practical solutions to improve its quality. It begins by considering the current state of English education in the formal context and identifying areas of weakness. Through an analysis of experience as English teachers, ways to enhance the quality of English language education in Thailand are proposed. The acknowledgment is made that improving English education in Thailand is a formidable task but one that is worth undertaking. The paper provides insights and recommendations for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the field of English language education in Thailand.

Keywords: English Language Education, Thailand, English Competence

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of English education in Thailand has been a subject of considerable discourse among teachers and language scholars over an extended period. The discourse has been on the negative side, because English may be viewed as a thorny spear lying next to Thailand. Attempts to grasp it cause pain. Hence, it is undeniable that, on the whole, the dissemination of English language usage has not achieved sufficient breadth in Thailand, despite numerous calls and attempts by academics and authorities to achieve this aim. English is currently perceived and recognized as the most important foreign language in Thailand despite the fact that acquiring a sufficiently high level of proficiency poses a significant challenge for us. English competence matters as it is related to other economic growth factors.

It is important to note that the English and Thai educational systems have a significant history of interaction. In the Thai educational system, English is a foreign language, teaching from grades 1 to 12. Some kindergartens even provide English lessons for young children. It can be said that English is taught from kindergartens to universities.

Vocational education is not an exception. Vocational students have to spend a great deal of time and effort studying English. Thai university students also enroll on at least 9 credits of English courses throughout the duration of their undergraduate studies. Considering the number of hours and days Thai students spend learning English, it raises questions concerning the cause of their low level of English proficiency.

However, one cannot deny the fact that mastering the English language remains a challenge for most Thais, which we are yet to achieve. Most attempts to acquire an acceptably high level of proficiency nationally have ended in failure. Although, it is not easy to find concrete and strong evidence apart from hearsays and expert opinions, we aim to seek evidence to support these claims. Wang (2015) argued that Thailand's low English proficiency ranking is a major disadvantage in the global economy. Thailand needs to improve its English proficiency in order to compete with other countries in the region, such as Vietnam and Indonesia. Wang also said that English is an important indicator of economic growth and national development. In a similar vein, International Trade Administration of the United States of American (International Trade Association) noted that Thailand has a lot of room for improvement, and the instructors' English proficiency is one of them.

One may turn to international tests or standards as evidence of Thai students' low performance. One of the most cited standards in English proficiency is the PISA. As a matter of fact, PISA does not test English proficiency. The PISA results show that some Thai youths perform below the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in areas such as reading, mathematics, or critical thinking. The results remind us that Thai students hardly reach the level of proficiency required to be global communicators (OECD, 2016, 2018).

In a more immediate, one cannot overlook the results of our national tests like the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) The O-NET test results of Primary level 6 students have been found to be the lowest among all the assessed subjects. The total number of 716,780 students, the mean score was only 40.31 (Admission Premium, 2016).

At the international level, the English ability of Thais is perceived as being well below average. The EF English Proficiency Index shows that out of 60 countries and territories, where English is not their mother tongue, Thailand manages only 55th place (English First, n.d.). Only a few countries are ranked below Thailand.

One of the most ardent critics of Thailand's English language performance is our own scholar and politician, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan. On many occasions, he has voiced his grave concerns about the country's low English standing. He mentioned that if Thais could improve their English skills, the economy of the country would be in a more secure and competitive position (Pitsuwan, 2012). Some ministers even came up with an innovative idea of demanding that all Thai teachers speak English to their students. The Prime Minister of Thailand has also urged Thais to improve their English, stating that it is a language of opportunities in the digital age.

English is very important for Thai graduates. For example, Thai engineering graduates often have to work in global companies or private industrial organizations in Thailand. English language is important to communication in these settings. A 2016 study by Sureeyatanapas, Boonma, and Thalangkan (Sureeyatanapas et al, 2016) found that Thai graduate employers value English reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills in that order. However, the study also found that Thai engineering graduates' English skills do not meet the requirements of employers.

The results of our national and international tests have led to one conclusion, that Thailand needs to work harder on improving the level of

English proficiency nationwide. In 2021, for example, the average score of Thai students' English test (English O-NET score) between 2015 until 2019 was not satisfactory, which was only 27.72 percent (Mala, 2021).

Many experts believe that speaking is the most crucial skill when it comes to communicating in English. Most schools in Thailand, however, spent a great deal of time teaching Thai students grammatical rules, mostly in Thai. Moreover, many Thai people struggle with speaking the language due to limited opportunities to practice it in their daily lives. Despite various teaching methods being used to help learners improve their speaking skills, what resulted was another disappointment (Wanich, 2014), implying that there exist other factors. A recent study found that factors such as learning style, age, attitude, family support, personality, language exposure, and English teachers play a role in enhancing one's ability to speak English fluently. The most influential factors were found to be personality and language exposure. The study aims to provide insight for both teachers and students on what helps individuals improve their English-speaking ability (Triwittayayon & Sarobol, 2018).

Evidence of Thailand's english challenges

There are many international schools and English programs in Thai schools and colleges, but the majority of Thai students and citizens have not done well in tests, especially in international tests. Thailand's English proficiency has been declining for the fifth consecutive year, according to the English Proficiency Index (EPI) by Education First (n.d). The country is now ranked 100 out of 112 participating countries, and its EF EPI score of 419 is considered "very low."

The EPI measures English proficiency among adults in 112 countries and territories. The score is based on a variety of factors, including listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills (Thaiger, 2021; The Bangkok Post, 2018).

Thais' performance in TOEIC is another challenge. The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is a widely recognized English proficiency test that assesses individuals' language skills in a business context TOEIC provides a score between 10 and 990, with 526 typically considered a lower score. the average score of Thailand to be only 526 in 2022 (S.D. = 205).

2. ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES

According to research, English language skills can be improved through management, academic interventions, media use, teaching methods, and policy implementation (Jacob & Renandya, 2018; Hanus, 2019; Wongsothorn et al. 2019). After informal discussions, a five-dimensional model for improving Thailand's English challenges was proposed: sociocultural, management, content, delivery, and teaching methods. The basis of this proposal is the conviction that English language education is related to several other bigger dimensions such as language policies and cultural values.

2.1 Sociocultural

At the societal level, Thailand perceives English as a foreign language (EFL). However, many Thai people regard it as an elite language. This perception is detrimental to progress as it hinders attempts to improve English language use. Another long-held belief is the national pride which the people have. Many Thais pride themselves as a country that has never been colonized by the Western superpowers. Some still regard English as a colonial tongue. This perception is quite damaging, for it has been cited as reasons leading to less English use and poor English proficiency.

For many Thais, there are negative attitudes of stigmas associated with learning English. There is the perception that English may water down the 'Thainess' or cause them to be more distant from their own home culture. This nationalist movement can explain, partly, why many Thais pronounce English words using Thai intonation and stress patterns. For some Thais, pronouncing English words like native speakers when conversing with other Thais or in public is considered 'pretentious' and often frowned upon by the majority.

On a positive note, new media is gradually changing the attitudes to learning English. Based on our observations, many Thais especially adolescents are gradually gaining confidence, and increasing use of English seems more evident. On the Internet and social media networks, Thai teens seem to be using English more widely. As globalization becomes more widespread within Thailand, English is needed to help enable Thais to be more competitive. Most jobs and companies require that prospective applicants be equipped with an acceptable level of English competence.

2.2 Management

Management plays a critical role in language program implementation (Chingos, 2013). Over 30,500 schools across Thailand lack funding for hiring qualified English teachers to help teach their students and to train their existing staff. Even though, some schools have received help from the local agencies, the impact is considered inadequate.

Students from larger urban schools tend to perform better than students in smaller rural schools on English proficiency tests. For example, the average English First (EF) score in Bangkok is 483, while the average EF scores in Ubon Ratchathani and Khon Kaen are 412 and 438, respectively. This may reflect the presence of inequality in the Thai educational system. Many smaller schools lack access to qualified English teachers. For example, a small school of 200 students may have only two English teachers who are responsible for the teaching of English of 200 students from primary level 1-6. It was also reported that some teachers were forced to teach English despite having limited knowledge of the language.

At the international stage, Thailand has a lot of room for improvement, especially the inequality of quality education. The OECD and UNESCO found that Thailand's recent investments in education have not resulted in the desired outcomes. The country's performance on international tests, such as the OECD's PISA study, is below that of many other countries. There are also significant disparities in student performance between schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas and those in advantaged areas, as well as between rural and urban areas. Thailand must continue to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and equity of its education system to ensure that it does not fall behind other countries in the region (UNESCO-OECD, 2016).

2.3 Content

In terms of contents, the obvious problem is the lack of instructional materials produced, edited, and created by Thai teachers or academics. This may point to the fact that Thailand's language education relies heavily on texts and contents from the West. It also points to the fact that Thai teachers' skills in producing and creating English materials are limited. Another characteristic is its centralized administration. Not many teachers in schools create their own EFL materials and not many schools dare to come up with their school curriculums. The majority rely on textbook publishers or the recommendations from the central authorities.

Teacher-created content could serve as comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) and make their learning relevant and more interesting (Tan, 2004). Moreover, localized content would contribute to other educational dimensions, including sustainable development (Thadphoothon, 2023).

2.4 Delivery

Delivery refers to how the curriculum has been translated into actual classroom practice. This is perhaps the biggest challenge Thailand is facing. If we look at the policy statements, starting from the national curriculum (core curriculum) itself, we can see that the emphasis is placed on the importance of English as a global language (Ministry of Education, 2008). What is also stated is the importance of the use of student-centered activities in class. However, in practice, most Thai teachers still hold on to the traditional ways, namely, the teacher-centered model. From the authors' experience, Thai teachers feel more comfortable teaching their students' grammatical rules and pattern drilling.

Some critics say that the Thai education system is highly centralized. The Ministry of Education is responsible for setting the curriculum and standards for all schools in Thailand. The government also provides financial assistance to schools, both public and private. Despite the fact that Thai schools in general have some degree of autonomy, which allows them to adapt the curriculum and standards to the needs of their students, the centralization mentality seems to limit their originality and creativity (Michael & Trines, 2018).

2.5 Teaching Method

A method is a way of getting something done. In ELT, grammar-translation is a traditional method in many Asian countries, including in Thailand. The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) emphasizes the study of grammar rules and the translation of sentences from the target language into the native language (English to Thai) and vice versa. GTM puts too much emphasis on reading and writing and neglects listening and speaking. Another disadvantage is that it is an unnatural method as it does not follow the natural order of learning which includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Khaled, 2015).

One of the most popular approaches among the methods of teaching ELT/ESL today is Communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT emphasizes the students' ability to communicate in real-life contexts, and students learn to make requests, accept offers, explain things, and express their feelings and

preferences (Richards & Rogers, 1999, 2001; Kawasaki, 2021). A survey of English teachers and experts in Thailand by Wongsothorn et al. (2019) found that English language teaching professionals from both Thailand and other countries agree that pragmatic, global, and communicative approaches are effective in teaching English. They also suggest that the teaching content should be pragmatic. What is pragmatic, according to Drew (2023), is useful, experiential, and integrative, realizing that “facts can change.”

3. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the afore-mentioned factors, we would like to propose the following:

1) The ability of Thai English teachers is a paramount factor in determining the quality of English instruction. At a broader scope, professional development should be adequately and systematically provided to as many Thai English teachers as possible. This may include their opportunities to experience English use in foreign countries such as in neighboring ASEAN states. This should include more opportunities to participate in language training courses such as pronunciation courses. Previous research findings (Sinlarat & Thadphoothon, 2016) suggest that Thai teachers lack adequate training opportunities, including their opportunities to improve their English language skills. The literature also points out that Thai English teachers, in general, find it a challenge to produce the so-called “internationally intelligible speech.” Many seem to have less confidence when they have to use English with others. In this regard, teacher training should be done in both modes: in-service training as well as pre-service training.

2) Incentives should be provided to Thai teachers who have fulfilled their duties in helping their students to be proficient in English. This support should be made known to all Thai teachers regardless of their primary subjects.

3) More student-centered activities should be introduced and implemented by Thai English teachers. The focus should be on encouraging speaking activities in class. Of course, this does not mean that reading and writing skills can be ignored. What we call for is activity-based instruction. Realizing the fact that English, like any other languages, involves skill practice. This can be done best by asking the students to act out or use the language, in addition to explicit and intensive language learning in the classroom.

4) National tests such as O-NET should incorporate speaking components. This can be done by asking external agencies to help assess the students’ oral fluency. Moreover, university admission requirements should make sure that the candidates’ English spoken skills are properly assessed. The

TOEIC test for Thailand as reported in 2022 showed that Asia does indeed have a slightly lower correlation (0.84) between reading and listening scores, compared to other regions such as North America (0.92) and Europe (0.89). This may partly provide an explanation reflecting the teaching method being used. While it is possible that the teaching emphasis on reading and grammar with limited focus on speaking could contribute to the lower correlation, it is important to consider other factors. By making oral fluency a requirement, additional procedures are required to assess their oral communication skills, in addition to the national test score and the cumulative grades from schools. By setting up such requirements, it is hoped that *washback effects* of the test will help gear English instruction towards more communicative instruction.

5) Another issue is the practice of teaching-to-the-test or exam-led approach to learning languages. Our thought is that the current approach to teaching English as a foreign/second language has been criticized for being overly focused on getting students to pass exams, rather than developing their overall language skills. Like many countries, in Thailand, the focus is primarily on exam preparation rather than developing overall language skills. This mentality, if anything, lacks emphasis on communicative language practice, which limits students' opportunities to engage in authentic and meaningful conversations, hindering the development of their speaking and listening skills. Classroom activities often prioritize written exercises, grammar drills, and reading comprehension tasks, which may not sufficiently prepare learners for real-life communication scenarios.

6) Additionally, there is a lack of standardization in the classroom, which can lead to an inconsistent level of education for students. One solution to this problem is to give individual teachers more autonomy in decision-making, while also implementing a standardized self-teaching program. This approach can address some of the issues with the current approach by ensuring that all students receive the same quality of education, while also allowing teachers to tailor their teaching methods to the specific needs of their students. However, it is important to consider the resources available to teachers and schools and to ensure that any changes in teaching methods are well-supported.

7) Lastly, AI applications should be utilized to support English instruction in Thailand. AI technology has the potential to provide personalized and adaptive learning experiences, immediate feedback, and access to a wide range of authentic language resources (Ng, 2023). Both teachers and students should be trained on how to use AI applications. Powerful as it is, AI is not a silver bullet. It must be noted that AI and machines do not help students in exam rooms. Rigorous practice and attention must be paid to forming effective habits in language learning. One may ask about the AI drawbacks. Olufemi Shonubi, the co-founder and CTO of Edutech Global,

says that AI in education can be expensive, lack human interaction, and raise privacy concerns (Shonubi, 2023). However, AI is meant to be a tool for teachers, not a replacement.

4. SUMMARY

The problems Thailand is facing regarding the effort to improve the quality of English language education. This study points to the need to develop the quality of Thai teachers in general. This study suggest that Thai English teachers should change their teaching approaches and use more English in the classroom. While AI can be a valuable tool in language learning and improvement, it's important to note that human interaction and practice remain crucial for developing authentic language proficiency.

REFERENCES

- Admission Premium. (2016). *O-NET results: Better but still low*. Retrieved from <http://www.admissionpremium.com/news/671>
- Bangkok Post. (2018, November 5). *Thai English proficiency drops*. Retrieved from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1570042/thai-english-proficiency-drops>
- Chingos, M. M. (2013). Class size and student outcomes: Research and policy implications. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 32(2), 411–438.
- Drew, C. (9 September 2023). *The 4 principles of pragmatism in education*. Retrieved from <https://helpfulprofessor.com/pragmatism-in-education/>
- English First. (2020, January 20). *EF English proficiency index 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.ef.com/epi/>
- English First. (n.d.). *EF English proficiency index*. Retrieved from <https://www.ef.com/epi/>
- International Trade Administration. (25 July 2022). *Thailand country commercial guide*. Retrieved from <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/thailand-education-services>
- Jacobs, G., & Renandya, W. (2018). *Cooperative learning in language education*. East Java, Indonesia: TEFLIN Publication.
- Khaled, M. (2015). *Advantages and disadvantages of grammar translation methods*. Retrieved from <https://mkhaledbh.wordpress.com/2015/11/14/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-grammar-translation-methods/>
- Kaewmala. (2012). *Thai education failures – Part 4: Dismal English-language training*. Retrieved from

- <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2012/03/thai-education-failures-part-4-dismal-english-language-education/>.
- Kawasaki, J. (2021, December 8). *5 popular ESL teaching methods every teacher should know*. Retrieved from <https://bridge.edu/tefl/blog/esl-teaching-methods/>
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
- Mala, D. (2021, January). Long-overdue end of O-Net exams. *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2044427/long-overdue-end-of-o-net-exams>
- Michael, R., & Trines, S. (2018, February 6). *Education in Thailand*. Retrieved from <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/02/education-in-thailand-2>
- Ministry of Education. (2008). *Basic education core curriculum: B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008)*. Bangkok: Office of the Basic Education Commission.
- The Nation. (November 2016). *Thailand ranks near bottom in English proficiency: Survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/business/Thailand-ranks-near-bottom-in-English-proficiency--30218895.html>.
- National News Bureau of Thailand. (2016). *PM urges Thais to improve English skills*. Retrieved from http://nwnt.prd.go.th/centerweb/newsen/NewsDetail?NT01_NewsID=WNPOL5907090010009.
- Ng, A. (29 August 2023). *Andrew Ng: Opportunities in AI - 2023* [YouTube]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/5p248yao3oE?si=bIUPLsVqXm_GMqFs
- OECD. (2016). *Low-performing students: Why they fall behind and how to help them succeed*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD. (2018). *Thailand*. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_THA.pdf
- Pitsuwan, S. (2012). *Driving Thailand's economy to the global stage (A public talk)*. Retrieved from <http://www.wu.ac.th/th/news/2253>
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1999). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: A description and analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J., & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sinlarat, P., & Thadphoothon, J. (2016). *Integrating transversal competencies in education policy and practice (phrase III)*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Shonubi, O. (2023, February 21). AI in the classroom: Pros, cons and the role of edtech companies. Retrieved from

- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2023/02/21/ai-in-the-classroom-pros-cons-and-the-role-of-edtech-companies/>
- Sureeyatanapas, P., Boonma, A., & Thalangkan, S. (2016). English proficiency requirements for engineering graduates at private organizations in Thailand. *Engineering and Applied Science Research*. 43, Special Issue (S1): The 6th KKU International Engineering Conference 2016, pp. 35–39. Retrieved from <https://ph01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/easr/article/view/69658>
- Tan, B. (ed.). (2004). *Creative writing in EFL/ESL classrooms I*. Serdang: UPM Press.
- Thadphoothon, J. (2023). *ELT for Sustainable Development: Texts and Methods*. In Proceedings of the 4th Language, Society and Culture International Conference (The 4th LSCIC), May 12, 2023.
- Thaiger. (2021, November 26). *Thailand's English proficiency level drops again, as the pandemic widens gap in education disparity*. Retrieved from <https://thethaiger.com/guides/education/thailands-english-proficiency-level-drops-again-as-the-pandemic-widens-gap-in-education-disparity>
- TOEIC. (2022). *2022 report on test takers worldwide - TOEIC® Listening & Reading test*. Retrieved from <https://www.ets.org/content/dam/ets-org/pdfs/toeic/toeic-listening-reading-report-test-takers-worldwide.pdf>
- Triwittayayon, T., & Sarobol, N. (2018). Factors Enhancing English Speaking Ability: Perspectives from Thai High School Students and Their Teachers. *ThaiTESOL Journal*. 31(1), 49-64.
- OECD-UNESCO. (2016), *Education in Thailand: An OECD-UNESCO perspective, reviews of national policies for education*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Wanich, W. (2014). The relationship between the CLT approach and Thai EFL students' attitudes and motivation in learning speaking. *Language Education and Acquisition Research Network Journal*. 7(1), 106
- Wang, Y. (5 December 2022). Low English Proficiency in Thailand Could Hinder the Country's Development Prospects. *Thailand Business News*. Retrieved from <https://www.thailand-business-news.com/business/94596-low-english-proficiency-in-thailand-could-hinder-the-countrys-development-prospects>
- Wongsothorn, A. et al. (2019). Innovative use of English language teaching as an international language in graduate studies in Thai universities. *LEARN Journal*. 12(2), 14-27.