FAILRE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THAILAND

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The inspiration to write this article came from having a chance to design and teach an English course for seven office people who work for a company that imports goods from suppliers abroad and distribute them to customers in Thailand. All the ideas, opinions, or conclusions in this article are drawn from

1. being a Thai student learning English in Thailand from schools, like most other Thai people
2. experience from being an English instructor at the tertiary level in Thailand (two semesters in a typical institution), meaning where Thai is used as the medium of instruction, and 5 years in an international university where using English to teach is a rule.
3. insights and realisation reached two years after finishing an MA in TESOL.

The purposes of writing this article are to humbly 1) offer a picture of, and reflect on the English language education in Thailand (ELET) 2) analyse the factors contributing to the failure of ELET, and 3) offer suggestions for the improvement or, perhaps reform probably needed for the betterment of ELET, all from my viewpoints. I have by no means any intentions to insult, blame, accuse, or find the culprit out of anyone or any institutions. In referring to them, I do so with respect as I am aware how much honour the teaching profession in Thailand receives and deserves. In fact I would like to start a discussion where if any scholars who have broader experience or views, or are simply wiser should agree or disagree with me should respond. Also I am referring to ELET during 1975 to 1992, the year when I finished my Bachelor. I have no idea what ELET today is like. Things may have changed greatly since ten years back. If so, this article can still serve for the purpose of comparing between the old and the new curriculum and their merits.

The story between English and me

Because I was brought to the writing of this article from my study and experience, I feel the need to narrate the story between English and me. From Kindergarten to Grade 3 I was in a private school where I started learning English in Grade 2. This was different in state-run schools where students began the English course for the first time in Grade 5. After finishing Grade 3 I went to a state-run school, meaning I was away from English for one year. This, however, did not put me in a better stand than my peers. We met our English teacher for one period everyday. All the English teachers I had had until before going to university had been Thai. All but one who changed my future with English used Thai when teaching and followed the chapters in the textbooks. In the junior high school level, there were two English subjects, Common Core English and Supplementary English. I am certain I did not have less than seven periods each week. I was quite a good student, scoring well in every subject. Although I did not perceive any particular liking for English at that time I worked harder than other students. For example, I kept a vocabulary notebook and collected new words. I remembered one of my friends asking me why I was doing so. I was also able to detect, by myself, the production of the interdental sound, which let me to
conclude that I have an aptitude for learning languages. In my senior high school, I was able to pass an entrance exam into a decent school, which changed, no, revolutionized my learning English. Here I was taught how to learn English. The school had its own methods of teaching. For example, teachers taught how words are used in context, their collocation, pronunciations and most importantly their parts of speech formation. Word formation is how to expand our vocabulary bank out of one head word by adding prefixes or suffixes to form its different parts of speech. In the tests, a paragraph would be given with blanks within. Next to those blanks were words given in different parts of speech. Students’ job was to decide what part of speech was required (noun, verb, adjective, or adverb) and to conjugate it correctly. However, my big step of progress came from meeting this teacher whose name I would like to mention with gratitude, A. Sarin Ngamjit. She just differed. With a Master’s degree from America, she excelled in the English language. She spoke English with no Thai accent and could use it as if it were her second language. She taught us so many new grammatical items, countless new words together with their uses, pronunciation, and other parts of speech formation. Most importantly, she taught in English, something very new and what I had never experienced from any previous English teachers. While other teachers limited their teaching content to that in the textbooks, she stepped outside and showed us the world, because she could discuss all about it. And she knew how to teach. The class was always fun, motivating, and I always looked forward to her class everyday. In other words, she had both: mastery in the subject matter, the English language, and teaching skills. Even when I got into university where I had Ph. D. lecturers, no teachers could make me feel that my English improved a lot like she did. Not only did she lay strong background in English for her students; she also became the inspiration and motivation, creating the love for the English language. There is no need to explain what you can achieve when you do what you love and love what you do.

In the tertiary level, though majoring in English, I strongly felt the halt in my progress in English. I no longer learned English, but about English. I took courses in skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), linguistics, and literature, but there were no courses for English. The love and desire to advance in English were still present, but I had no clue what to do.

After my graduation in November 1995, I became an English instructor in the tertiary level at a typical institution, meaning an institution where I spoke Thai when teaching. I had wanted to be an English teacher and I told myself I could be but a teacher. But I was not different from those teachers I had had, even worse (By this I by no means mean that those teachers were not good). At least, although they did not master English, they were experienced. But I was just starting my career. Now when I looked back I know I was an RR (Really Rotten) teacher. I taught there for two semesters before coming to Assumption University, Thailand’s first international university in June 1997.

At ABAC, all teachers are required to teach in English. That was the time I would say my career was actually beginning. Teaching in English is so hard, very hard. Sometimes some Thai slipped from my mouth, and I could hardly convince my students to use English when conversing with me. This was because most of the time all my students were Thai. Also, through teaching, I came to realize how much I still needed to know about English. In 1998, I started my Master’s in TESOL, getting to learn about teaching and theories in language learning, which took me almost
two years to finish. I spent two years later filling career gaps that I had—any weaknesses in English and teaching. For gaps in English, ABAC was the right environment for developing English, as my fellow teachers were non-Thai, and most of them had better English than I did.

When interacting with them I received more language input and feedback. Opportunities for “communicative output” (Harmer 1991: 40) were plenty. As for the second area, gaps in teaching, I internalized and gained insights into those principles and theories I “studied” while doing the MA. For example, one of the most difficult courses was Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The final paper was an assignment to summarize our beliefs about how people learn a second language. I remembered typing and deleting again and again on the computer screen, just not being able to arrive at such a conclusion. How could I when even Harmer (1991: 31) accepted that “No one knows exactly how people learn languages although a great deal of research has been done into the subject”. What I did was writing what I could answer and filled those gaps with theories from the prescribed SLA textbook, not being able to judge whether they were right or wrong. The theories I then quoted were about learners’ hypothesis formation, testing, rejection, modification, and confirmation. The picture of the learning process just became clearer after two years. I am now able to reflect on how I advanced in English as well as realizing that the theories I quoted are more or less right. Learners do go through those stages or processes acquiring more language. To make this clear I will explain how I learned more English. Take, for example, the word “respectively”. I saw the word used in context and formed the conclusions about its meaning and use. Later when a chance for testing the hypothesis came, I tried it out in writing, receiving confirmation when my use was not corrected, that my hypothesis was right. These processes were true for learning new words, structures, and many expressions. Also I could come up with some teaching techniques which I shared with my fellow teachers. Five years at ABAC proved priceless. The intensive nature of the English courses here which consequently calls for a lot of preparation on the teacher’s part, the high standards which I had to strive to meet, and the requirement for the medium of instruction made me who I am today.

In conclusion, I believe three factors accounted for my success in learning English: a generally fairly good IQ, an English language aptitude, and being in the right condition and environment for mastering English, being a language teacher, and working at ABAC.

Has ELET failed?

I say ELET has been a failure, the conclusion I reached when teaching and interacting with those seven office people. They were shocked when I taught in English, could not understand and follow my lecture. They could not respond. Nor did they want to speak in front of the class, or they waited until the last minute. When they had to do so it was extremely difficult and they often fell back on Thai. When it came to reading and writing, they also had problems. They could finish the assigned homework only with the help from their supervisor and me. For people who have been through the minimally required education for career people—Bachelor degree, comparing how much knowledge they have in store and can exploit in other subjects and English, and thinking that the goal of ELET is to educate all students, not just students who have a fair IQ, and/or a language aptitude, and leave the rest behind, and if these are the people representing the majority of Thai people, I would call this the failure of ELET.
If one argued that insufficient learning periods were given to the study of English, I would say this was rather the opposite. In junior high school, as I have narrated, I had two English teachers, three in senior high. In one day I had at least one English period, normally two. Once a week we would go to the language lab to practise listening and speaking. A typical Thai student who has finished his/her Bachelor degree will have had studied English for about eight or nine years. So the argument concerning insufficient study periods is, in my view, invalid. Or at least we can expect our students to be able to use English to do more, not almost nothing like it is at present.

Causes of failure

1. Lack of needs

The excuse for failure in ELET I very often hear and perhaps has become our national excuse is that “Thailand has never been colonised by any Western countries.” While I do not argue that we can and should be proud of that (which by no means implies superiority), and this in fact has contributed to the differences in success in the English language education in Thailand and other South East Asian countries, I disagree if we should hide behind that any more and allow this failure to continue.

When colonised, the needs for the local people’s ability to communicate in the language of the ruling country were created. There would certainly be inflow of the people from the ruler country, which would at least lead to the construction of certain facilities and services for them, and consequently job demands. Or the mother tongue of the ruler country was made the official, first, or second language, meaning some paper work had to be done in that language and so on.

The story is completely different in Thailand, where Brown (1994) defines the learning context as a foreign one. In this context, effort must be made to create opportunities for contexts of communication beyond the classroom. Apart from the fact that students are required to learn English in school, there are no other needs or reasons at all why students should strive to have contact with or to master English. They can survive or even live perfectly happily without English. Also you cannot expect them to appreciate the big advantage of standing a better chance in getting a job, advancing in career, or participating in global activities. For kids this is very distant to realize. You can convince them so but whether they are convinced or not is another matter. Most of the time, they realize this when they are about to or have already entered the working world and it is too late. Now that the needs are absent, kids need other kinds of inspiration or motivation.

2. Thai English teachers who do not master English

Due to the context discussed above, classrooms become the only place where students can receive language input, from teachers. Brown (1994: 121) points out that “the language you [teachers] present, model, elicit, and treat takes on great importance”. I propose that in most circumstances teachers determine the success or failure of ELET.
In the "Good Language Teaching Characteristics" checklist that Brown (1994: 430) offered, there are 4 areas: technical knowledge, pedagogical skills, interpersonal skills, and personal qualities. In the first where there are six items, two are as follows:

1. Understands the linguistic systems of English phonology, grammar and discourse. ... 2. Has fluent competence in speaking, writing, listening to, and reading English."

While the above qualities are demanded from English teachers, especially in the EFL context, I say that these are what most Thai English teachers lack and if I am correct, this is a fact painful to accept! But maybe it is time we have to face it.

"Mastery" in my definition does not mean ultimate attainment—native-like ability. But to progress in English, students need to be provided with sufficient quantity of language input so that they can build their language store available for use, as I have described how I learned more English. From my experience, however, most teachers do not know many things about English. For example, they have no idea how to say certain things, expression such as "I knew it." or when to say, "I didn't know." instead of "I don't know." They are the people who have learned English the inefficient way they are using in teaching themselves. As a result, they are not in a position to provide rich input. Most of them, then, turn to the grammar-translation method because it allows them to use their mother tongue, and follow the textbook without calling for expertise in the subject matter. While this offers security for teachers because they can say they have done the best—finishing the textbook content, students are hardly engaged intrinsically in the learning materials and processes. If students do not know how to do or say things in English because even their teachers do not know how to do so, expecting them to communicate in English is a dream that will never come true.

3. Curriculum a) that emphasizes on rules rather than communication b) whose content is insufficient and c) only provides opportunities for "practice" and not "communicative output" (Harmer 1991: 40)

The first point accounted for why I did not succeed in learning French and Italian and gave up so soon. In the senior high level, I chose the French program, thinking that it would be profitable to know more languages than other people. After a semester, however, I had this gut feeling that something was not right. There were so many (meaningless and unnecessary) rules to remember about grammar and vocabulary. I could see no reason why every word should have a gender and why I should bother to contribute a part of my brain to memorize it when, without gender, meaning could still be understood. I had a teacher who was dedicated, hard-working, and determined to turn her students into stars, and who spoke French in class! Despite all that, the features of the romance language—conjugation, word gender, cases and so on—overwhelmed me. They were like barriers I had to cross before I could use French to do something. When I tried Italian, another romance language, with the same burden, I had the same feeling. Had the communicative purpose and activities been the major parts of the class, had I done some speaking instead of my teacher, and had those burdening grammar rules been de-emphasized and incorporated in, I would be able to speak four languages now, instead of two. I view that to learn a new language, especially after the critical period, the focus should be on communication, not rules, the purpose being using the language as a vehicle to achieve tasks. If grammar rules
overwhelm learners, if it takes them so many steps to take before they can purposefully communicate, and if they are not made to see or feel any success soon, those rules will confuse, tire, bore, demotivate them, and they will just give up.

ELET is like that, forcing students to go “step-by-step”. Students are exposed to those threatening language features, and have to learn and master certain rules before they can move on to the next, for fear that they will get confused. In fact, language is a system of many elements put to interact together and when infants learn their first language, their parents do not teach them step-by-step. Still, they all become competent users of their mother tongue.

The second and third points are interrelated. Only when I moved to teach at ABAC where English is taught intensively and extensively did I realize how much I still did not know about the English language—many aspects and uses of grammar, vocabulary, expressions, idioms and culture for example. And I need to know them all to be a competent language user! I was so ashamed of myself, for I majored in English. At the end of each academic year, has there been an evaluation on how much active knowledge students possess? Can they write a paragraph of five sentences, or give their personal profile orally? Passive evaluation is no longer enough because in the real world they need active knowledge and skills and these are what they lack most.

Next, communicative output. Harmer’s chapter four has provided the answers to how people learn, if not the first, second language. Receiving input and practicing are not enough; learners need opportunities for communicative output, which are very much absent from the English language periods. For example, when it came to “Telling Directions”, though I had chances to practise, I did so from made-up maps. I learned expressions like “Turn left/right”, “Go straight on”, and “The post office is on your left”. But I would not be able to tell, if a farang (red head) arrived at my school and asked me where the principal’s office was. At Grade 10, I (and I believe most students) still could not explain how to make fried rice. Even when I became a teacher, it was quite hard for me to write a memo to my boss. This was simply because I had seldom been asked to do so. Thai students learned memorized phrases or expressions and were asked to rehearse and demonstrate just those, never beyond. Students, if not majoring in English, will hardly be given any written assignments. My English progressed immensely after becoming an English teacher because I had plenty of opportunities for practice and output, chances I did not quite get in school or university.

**Effects of ELET failure**

1. Employees who are blocked from functioning to the utmost in organizations

This is true and is becoming more problematic for many businesses. Our country has been globalised. Commercial contacts and cooperation with international corporations increase. So are the needs for people who can communicate in English. But most employees cannot! The situation now is that the boss, instead of focusing on sales strategies, has to answer email and write letters by him/herself because his secretary cannot do so in English. A dedicated and able engineer is replaced from training abroad, simply because s/he cannot answer phone calls or understand instructions in English. Many companies have reached the dead-end. They want to keep these people who have learned the company’s business, functions and system, and who are
loyal and dedicated. But business transactions slow down. The boss wants to keep the same team members; they work well with each other. But this same team is holding him and the company back. What to do? Kick them out and hire new staff? Keep them? Or make them take an intensive English course?

2. The needs to find the right learning context for oneself—going abroad, and the flourishing of international schools and study programs

As I said, a typical Thai student who has been through the tertiary level will have studied English for about eight to nine years, but is still unable to use it to do things. After their graduation, these people will mostly enter the business world. Some will further their education. At this point when they are getting a clearer picture of themselves and the world, they realize how important English is, as when they go through job advertisements, see that apart from the primary requirement, having the degree and experience in the right field, good command of English earns them more chances of getting the job they want. Only then will they realize how weak they are in English. This influences their decision of furthering their education. Some will go abroad, if they can afford, to the countries whose native tongue is English, like America, Britain, Australia, or New Zealand. For families whose parents have “vision” and money, they send their children abroad or to international schools. Many academic institutions, realizing the demand, open international programs as cheaper alternatives.

I am not in the position to discuss the effects of the flourishing of these international schools and programs. What I notice is kids in these schools are not as good in the Thai language, compared with those attending the normal program. While these kids will eventually inherit their parents’ business and become the administrator, will weaknesses in their mother tongue jeopardize their business in any unpredictable ways, for example, not gaining acceptance and consequently respect because of their childish handwriting and misspelling? How about cultural impact—the feeling or view that Thai is inferior? Is it only Thai or “Thailand”?

3. The demand for native English speaking personnel and the associated privileges

Because Thai teachers are unable to provide sufficient input, the demand for people who can—(native) English speaking personnel, is created. Go to ESL websites and you will see that some of the advertisements write “Only native speakers need apply.” Notice also the remuneration that is much higher than that for the local teachers. How about fringe benefits? While the common comment is that some of them are unqualified teachers (not having a degree in language or teaching), I see this as uncrucial. What concerns me, which is often overlooked when hiring them, is their lack of career commitment. Some of these people have neither taught before nor do they intend to be teachers. The teaching job is just the easiest thing available that gives them the chance to live in Thailand because of the high demand. This matters, in my opinion, because they have no idea what it takes to be a teacher, nor are they ready for such dedication as preparation, homework correction, extra counselling hours, and other qualities Thai people expect from the profession. Sometimes, this serious profession is even taken for granted. Career-associated privileges are exploited as we have seen many such examples on the media. Another point is that we often mistake any farangs for “native speakers”, which is not always true. People from most European countries clearly are not.
While the actual problem is that most Thai people cannot communicate in English, in reality, businesses do not need people who have native-like English to be able to work. They just want people who can communicate. To make our students reach that level, we do not need native speaking teachers. Thai teachers, our teachers, can do this job. But we certainly need Thai teachers with better English. (Please notice that I do not say we need better teachers. Our teachers are good.)

4. National inferiority

Though many factors contribute to the feeling that farangs and their countries are superior and I propose that the topic be studied at a deeper level, one of those factors is certainly language. All language learners, when their language data reached a certain level, will want to put together the knowledge they possess, in other words, try out their knowledge, through using it. This is as natural and automatic as puberty. But because such opportunities are rare in the classrooms, farangs become the only available source. I certainly remember the inner excitement I felt when meeting farangs, and I am sure other language learners felt the same too. Farangs complement what has been missing from the successful language learner process, and they gain in importance. That is why we “value and honour” them, compromise, and give them privileges. This phenomenon is understood (or rather, misunderstood or mistaken) as Thai people’s hospitality towards “foreigners”. Ask ourselves, “are we as nice and kind to other non-Thais—people who do not have farang look (and this is a real information question, not a scornful one)? Because the English language has become what most of us cannot overcome, we feel inferior to the people who speak the language. Because we feel they and their countries are superior, we travel to their countries, use their (brand-name) products, use their textbooks, follow their ways of thinking, believe in what they say, and forget who we are. Other countries were colonised and they have long declared their independence. How about Thailand? Can we say loudly and proudly that we are not being colonised?

Suggestions

I humbly suggest that Thai English teachers follow the path I took, because it worked with me. All English teachers, regardless of the level they are teaching, should try to use English as the medium of instruction, and they should start immediately. Teachers can no longer argue that they are just teaching Grade 5 or 6 and do not need to know much. They can still use Thai and students can learn more in the higher levels. If teachers hold to this idea, they are just finding an excuse for not developing themselves, and failure in ELET can never be solved. I believe, however, that no teachers have such an idea. I have talked to many. Most of them have (a few) native speaking peers hired by the government and these teachers are eager to learn more. Teaching in English is hard for two reasons. First of all, you have to have a really good command of English to be able to teach. Even harder, you have to overcome the unaturalness and awkwardness of speaking English to students who share the same mother tongue with you. To do so teachers need determination, unfailing effort, and certainly time. The merits of attempting to teach in English are:
a) For the teachers, they will gradually progress in English, simply because the tasks demand them to learn more about English. They need to master English if they are to teach English in English. Also they will come to know how to broaden and deepen their English, what paths to follow or what sources to turn to, for example, to make the most of the English-English dictionary, or grammar books, to read English novels and not the translated versions, etc. Thai students are often criticised (even by me) as passive and uninvolved learners who do not ask questions, never comment or express their opinions. Whatever explanations any scholars have tried to give, I think this is because Thai students view teachers as a repository of any kind of knowledge. In other words, teachers are books in manifestation. It is much easier to ask someone whom you trust knows anything you want to know than to find out about something by yourself, and we are used to it. While Western kids run to books, Thai kids, or even adults, consult teachers. This is at least true for me. I do have this habit of asking teachers instead of consulting books.

Now when teachers know how to master something, they can be examples for their students. Instead of using the grammar-translation method, teachers telling students everything, they can now guide them how to learn.

b) For students, they will get expert teachers. Their teachers already have mastery in teaching through those years of being in service. Now that they have the other, mastery in the subject matter, they are now (nearly) perfect teachers who can provide sufficient quantity of input, build solid language background, guide students learning methods and strategies, and be the inspiration and/or motivation in learning English.

They will also become more capable on the productive skills, especially speaking. Students cannot speak English partly because their teachers do not speak English with and to them. By this I mean through speaking English to students teachers are showing them how words are strung together to make a sentence. Students need this presentation and I believe that little by little they will be able to detect and form hypotheses or conclusions about, or in other words, decode the interrelationship between each language element. This explains why students going abroad can speak the language so soon although they are not very articulate before the journey.

c) For our nation, this will be a country in which competent English users reside. Employees will function better in a/an (business) organization. We will call back the huge amount of money we spend in those countries. We will no longer have to pay expensively to foreign teachers at the expense of giving them privileges sometimes they do not deserve. The money can be paid instead to hard-working, dedicated Thai teachers. Free from those fog of enchantment of the farang influences, we will be able to appreciate the value of Thai language, culture, cultural inheritance, and gradually take pride in ourselves. We will no longer see in the job advertisements such statements as “Candidates with good command of English will be given priority”.

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References


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