

Are Our Objectives Realistic?

By A. Rognvald Scott

It is, I believe, generally acknowledged that Thailand is not at the top of the league in South East Asia where proficiency in using the English language is concerned. This is of course connected with the country's unique history as an independent kingdom, never colonised, and with its own vibrant culture and language.

However, with the progress of globalization it is increasingly recognized by leaders of opinion in Thailand - bureaucrats, businessmen and academics as well as politicians - that as the 21st century advances, Thailand's lack of proficiency in English language usage could affect the country's economic performance and hence living standards. The TOEFL boom which I wrote about in a previous number of *Galaxy* and a stream of articles in the press about English language education and teaching methodology bear witness to changing attitudes and priorities in this area.

In Thailand, as most readers of this piece will be aware, there are two generally recognised language tests available for assessing the English language proficiency of non-native speakers. The first is TOEFL widely used in the United States, South America and countries where American educational patterns predominate. The TOEFL tests are coordinated and administered by Princeton University. The second test known as IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is jointly managed by the University of Cambridge, the British Council and IDP Education Australia. This test is favoured by universities in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

An interesting article in a recent issue of the Bangkok Post, discussed the experiences of a group of Thai graduate students who were trying to improve their IELTS scores in order to take up places on Masters or Ph.D. programmes at universities in Australia or Britain. The students fields of study ranged from anatomy (Mahidol student) to international business (Thammasat student) and they were studying for 6 hours a day.

The current IELTS examination lasts about 3 hours and covers the four basic skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking. As well as answering multiple choice type questions students are required to write two short essays and take part in an interview lasting about 15 minutes. Each of the four modules is graded on a nine point scale with nine defined as an expert user - basically a native speaker - and one as a non - user. The key score is the overall average of the four modules and most quality universities and colleges require a score of between six and seven.

To give some idea of the significance of the various bands I quote below definitions according to IELTS guidelines.

Band 4 - pre intermediate level defined as “a limited user” with basic competence limited to familiar situations. A person at band four has frequent difficulties in understanding and expressing and is unable to use complex language.

Band 5 - intermediate level “a modest user” of English having partial command of the language, able to cope with overall meaning in most situations “such a person is likely to make many mistakes but should be able to handle basic communication in his own field.

Band 6 - a “competent user” having generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies and misunderstandings.

Band 7 - a “good user” having operational command of the language with only occasional lapses. He or she generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.

Two comments made by the director of studies about the group of students mentioned above are worth noting. First he expressed surprise that many of his candidates - all graduates - were at the intermediate level (Band 5) while quite a few were at the pre-intermediate level (Band 4). Second, drawing on his own experience he reckoned that it takes about 300 hours of classroom study to move from band 5 to band 6. But this is not enough. To be sure of attaining an overall average score of 6.5 students would have to put in many hours of private study and read widely to learn something about topics - for example social problems - that they might be asked to write or speak about in their examination.

I agree with most of the comments expressed by the IELTS examiner but I don't share his surprise at the relatively poor English language skills displayed by his graduate students. His impressions could be confirmed by any moderately experienced teacher of English at a Thai University or High School. The root of the problem, or so it seems to me, lies in the Thai educational system in which, until fairly recently, English studies were either undervalued or accorded low priority. Moreover it would appear that many teachers, however academically well qualified, are not effective in foreign language instruction or, alternatively their courses are poorly designed.

Otherwise I cannot understand why students entering ABAC after studying English at high school for 7 or 8 years are still unable to write simple sentences, understand the concept of verb tenses or distinguish between adjectives and adverbs. Naturally I am surprised when students tell me that most of their English periods at school were devoted not to conversation in English but to the study of grammar.

And I am not merely surprised but disturbed to discover that almost all of the points of grammar and syntax with which I am concerned have been covered in the Basic English and English I and English II courses. These courses seem to me well designed – though of course no syllabus is perfect. How then can one explain why so many students can pass these courses and arrive in English IV with such an imperfect grasp of basic grammar? I confess that I do not know the answer to this question though I suspect that variable grading may be part of the problem.

Having regard to the foregoing, I should say that the examiners' findings about the IELTS test group referred to above are highly relevant to ABAC's situation. Certainly they tend to confirm my own experience in teaching English IV and some MBA students. I would hazard a guess that at present about half – possibly as many as two thirds of my English IV students would score 5.5 or 6 on an IELTS test confined to listening reading comprehension and (more doubtfully) speaking. But if writing were included the scores would be mostly at the intermediate level say 5 or 5.5. And there are some students – between 10 and 15 percent – whom I would place at the pre-intermediate level, say between 4.5 and 5 on the IELTS scale, where writing is involved. This of course reflects weakness in grammar and syntax and a limited vocabulary.

If what I say is correct – and I should emphasize that I am expressing purely personal opinions and make no claim to scientific rigour – it can be argued that we have in the past been too optimistic in our assumptions about the language learning abilities of Thai students entering ABAC's core English programme (English I – IV). If this is true then both these assumptions and the related aims and objectives should be re-examined. In so far as concerns aims and objectives, these can, I think, be easily identified for each level of an English programme, whether Basic English or English IV, but defining them with precision can be tricky. For example what are the ultimate aims or objectives of ABAC's English programme? Many teachers might respond or agree with an answer such as "to teach students to communicate effectively in English".

This might be acceptable at a language school – and there are many such in Bangkok – primarily concerned with teaching students "to speak English". But such a definition of the aims or objectives of an English course would be inadequate for a university or business college using English as the medium of instruction and where written communication is important. In this context a better definition of the aims of the English course or programme would be :

"To teach students to communicate effectively in both written and spoken English".

However once the concept of written communication is introduced several difficulties arise. Chief among these is that in the principal European languages learning to write correctly – and this means working within a framework of established rules of grammar and syntax – is much more difficult than learning to speak sufficiently well to communicate effectively. In ordinary speech – verbal communication to employ the textbook jargon – errors in grammar and vocabulary, repetitions, circumlocutions and unfinished sentences can be tolerated whereas they are not acceptable in a written document. And it should be recognised that most language programmes – certainly the crash course variety – are primarily concerned with verbal communication, not with writing.

A final reference to aims and objectives might be appropriate at this point. As remarked earlier it is important that objectives be clearly defined but it is equally important that they should be realistic, or in other words attainable. Students at the Staff College in Britain are constantly reminded that although "Selection and maintenance of the Aim" is the first of the principles of war "The Factors affecting the attainment of the Aim" must always be considered in any appreciation before objectives are finally set. This principle can and should be applied to many activities unconnected with military operations.

At ABAC the English Department has always set high standards for passing grades and I support this policy; but I fear that our objectives have not always been realistic in a local context. For example we used to try to teach students in English IV, many of whom were - and still are - incapable of drafting a short memorandum - to write formal reports, an activity that requires considerable skill and experience.

Fortunately this is no longer the case. But we (the English Department) still require our students to achieve an overall score of 90% in order to obtain an 'A' grade. This in my view, is unrealistic. Such a score would be equivalent to an 'A+' at one of the older British universities - the only ones with which I am familiar. I have not so far met any locally educated Thai undergraduate student who is capable of this level of performance in English composition, though some students educated in places such as Singapore or Taiwan might come close.

Such a judgement might seem to some observers either too harsh or excessively pessimistic. But I must emphasize that I am referring to English composition - essay writing if you like - and not to performance in multiple choice tests which are at best a precarious guide to a candidate's ability to write clear, grammatical English. The frequently weak performance of successful TOEFL and IELTS candidates in written English examinations confirms this point.

It remains to summarize my own views on the continuing debate about the teaching and use of English in Thailand, with particular reference to the situation at Assumption University. I think that one must begin by recognising the unique position enjoyed by ABAC in Thailand. It has been a pioneer in promoting the use of English in business education and its efforts in this field are highly regarded by the local business community. The continuing demand for places at the university is the best tribute to its reputation.

There is also I believe fairly general agreement that ABAC's use of the English language as the medium of instruction is perhaps its strongest attraction and selling point for both parents and students. Over the past ten years other private universities have appeared offering comparable programmes taught in English, but I believe that ABAC still holds the first place in public esteem.

Within ABAC the English Department is mainly responsible for maintaining and improving standards in English language education as well as setting objectives for course development. In the Thai educational context this is both a daunting responsibility and a challenging assignment. I'm not sure that those critics of the department's efforts who are not directly involved with the English programme are aware of the nature and extent of the problems that have to be overcome to make any progress.

In conclusion, I incline to believe that improving English language education in Thailand is, like Bangkok's traffic congestion, in the category of problems that cannot be solved but only eased or made more manageable. However I offer the following suggestions as a contribution to the debate on how to improve both our English programme and the performance of our students.

First, the criteria used to determine both passing and higher grades should so far as possible, be the same throughout the university. No course should acquire the reputation of being a 'soft option'.

Second, the number of marks required to pass courses or obtain higher grades should be kept under constant review. Are we in some cases being too strict and in others too lenient? There may be a case for some adjustments, but we should at all costs avoid 'grade inflation'.

Third, we should determine whether our English programme is primarily aimed at improving students' writing or speaking skills. In my view it is virtually impossible to do justice to both in the classroom hours available within the existing curriculum.

Fourth, the criteria for granting exemptions from English courses on the basis of scores achieved in TOEFL or IELTS tests require regular scrutiny. These tests are essentially concerned with spoken English and should not become a way of obtaining higher grades in English writing courses. Otherwise serious anomalies will arise that could affect the credibility of the entire grading system.

Fifth, England's major contribution to the arts and to culture in the Western sense of the term has been in literature. Though ABAC is essentially a business university I think the study of the English classics should be more actively encouraged and pursued. Leaving aside the great poets - most notably Shakespeare and Milton, - I have in mind a course covering 19th century novelists who have achieved classic status such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and George Eliot. In the early 20th century writers such as Henry James, D.H. Lawrence could be included and, later on, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, fine stylists both.

I recognize that in the age of Video games and DVD such a course might not attract a wide audience and certainly not among undergraduate students.

However, I am persuaded that reading any of the authors cited above can give one a feeling for the genius of the English language which the study of Business English, an essentially vocational exercise or drill, can never do.

I hope that the suggestions offered above are of some value. However, lest the debate over their implications becomes too heated, I hasten to assure readers that they are offered in the spirit of Jack Tanner's maxim in "The Revolutionists Handbook". (in Bernard Shaw's play 'Man and Superman')

"The golden rule is that there are no golden rules".

Notwithstanding all that have been written above I believe Jack Tanner's maxim is not without relevance to the learning and teaching of English - even as a second language. However as debate and controversy on this topic is endless I shall say no more and leave it to my colleagues to take up the challenge.

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