

English Education at Primary Level in Thailand

Pornpimon Prasongporn, Ph.D

Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

prasongpornp@hotmail.com

As English is claimed as an international language or a global language, it is widely used for being a key to unlock the door of communication and mutual understanding among people in various countries. English also plays the crucial roles in serving the various status such as being the official language, as the medium of instruction, as a mandatory subject and as a lingua franca. Recognition of the power of English as a mean of communication is accepted around the world and it is also fast becoming as one of the basic skills for the learners at primary level of education in Thailand. The demand for English in Thailand has been dramatically increasing in the decades for the change of globalization and the establishing of ASEAN community has become a strong power on the change of language learning. As a result, the government's intention has been developed greater fluency in English language among Thai students and makes Thai people better prepared for the economic competitiveness both individually and as a nation. Learning language is necessary in order to gain not only the economic competitiveness in the world but it is a tool for communication. Hence, English facilitates mobility for many reasons - including commerce, tourism, study and the access of interdisciplinary and this, in turn, contributes towards the prosperity of individuals, the nations and the global citizen. In Thailand, English is considered to be a subject that plays the vital roles as a gate keeping device in language education system. It is learned since the students start their school lives in the early age. English is a compulsory subject from the primary level to the higher education.

Major issues on English Education at primary level in Thailand

English Language Reforming Policy

Thai Government has recognized the vital roles of English that plays in the global society and allows the Ministry of Education to elevate the English language competency among the students as well as the teachers. The policies and strategic plans in promoting English Language learning and teaching have been announced in each government. The Ministry of Education also viewed that the process on elevating the effectiveness of English language learning and teaching should include in

all developmental elements involved, that is to say - the clarity of language learning policy, the interpretation of policy into practices, the development of curriculum, the quality of teachers, the teaching and learning process, and the plans for materials provided.

In the year 2014, the Ministry of Education announced the latest policy to reform teaching and learning English in the basic education level. Regards to the policy, there is general agreement among language teachers, and scholars that the adoption of the CEFR is a vital step towards clarifying language goals and raising English Language standards among Thai youths in the near future. The policy becomes the strong commitment and the solid attempt to improve the English Competency among Thais to better prepare for the ASEAN community. The English Language forming policy as its details as follow:

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which is considered to be an international standard of languages is stipulated for schools to be used as the main principles for the enacting of English language teaching and learning, the designing of language curriculum, the stating of learning goals, the developing of teaching & learning, the testing and assessment of learning outcomes, as well as the developing of teacher profession. The framework is used for benchmarking communicative language competence and it is divided into 6 levels from A1- C2. The Ministry of Education has also set the English language proficiency targets for students such as by the end of primary level; students should have reached A1 proficiency.

2. Align the process of language learning and teaching with the natural ways of its teaching and learning by emphasizing on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and also shifting the status of teaching approach from grammar translation to Communicative Language Teaching. It is also introduced that English learning should start from listening, speaking, reading, and writing respectively.

3. Promote English teaching and learning through the alignment of the benchmarks stated in CEFR into the curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and with various means of implementation due to the students' attitude and interest along with the school's readiness.

4. Enhance the English proficiency elevating by setting up the programmes of studies as follow:

- 4.1 expanding special programme of language studies by setting up English Programme (EP) Mini English Programme (MEP), International Programme (IP), English Bilingual

Education Programme (EBE) and English for Integrated Studies (EIS) in all types of schools – public and private schools and in all levels of basic education.

4.2 Develop special programmes for English learning by setting up the Enrichment Classes which include the activities that promote English for social interaction, academic literacy and adding at least 2 - hour - conversation class for a week. Besides, there should be more initiating in curriculum and courses on English for Careers with their aims at the preparation for students who has the needs of school leave and work.

4.3 Promote the enhancement of ability in English language by creating the activities and school milieus that promote English learning such as intensive English language camps for 2-4 weeks (84-170 hours) and international camps for highly potential students during school breaks. The schools can set up the additional periods of time in language learning, the consecutive periods of language study for a half day, and/or a day or more. Furthermore, the school milieu should include the energized environment that help promote communicative practice among learners such as Literacy Day, English Zone, English Corner, language competition and contests, bulletin boards, the promoting of reading habits both in and outside classes with wide variety of genres.

4.4 Initiate the English conversation within teaching and learning in English classes and also promote English Enrichment courses as additional or elective courses for students with their learning background of interest, and potential.

5. Elevating teachers' skills in language teaching in line of the conception on Communicative Language Teaching and the framework of CEFR is also enacted. The assessment and evaluation of English both content and skills are tested among teachers of English. Consequently, the plans on teacher professional development, the supervision and monitoring system, the process of coaching and mentoring can be initiated based on their abilities.

6. Promote the use of ICT media for education as a tool to develop the language abilities among teachers and students. The production and selection of E-Content Learning applications, language practices and tests that are standardized and qualified for English learning will be included. In addition, the emphasis will be placed on learning language through digital media for the skills of listening and word or sentence pronouncing.

The Elements of Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 and its Implementation

Most schools and teachers in the primary level are energetic and pay much more attention to curriculum development process. Teachers have been involving in the process of school based curriculum development, so that they can understand and are aware of the roles of curriculum play in teaching and learning process. The Ministry of Education launched the Basic Core Curriculum 2015 which benefits for lesson planning because the learning standards, indicators and core contents in each area of subject are prescribed. All of these are the elements that lead the teaching and learning to be achieved.

Based on the language learning area of Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008, English is a one of mandatory subjects starting from Grade 1 in primary education to Grade 12 in secondary education level. Language learning is aimed at enabling learners to acquire a favourable and positive attitude towards the language, the ability to use English for communicating in various situations, researching for knowledge, engaging in a livelihood and pursuing further education at higher levels. The main contents of English include eight standards which include four strands of study namely – Communication, Culture, Connection and Community. The focus of the strands is discussed below:

1. Communication: It mainly focuses on the use of English as it is Mode of communication – Interpretation mode, Interpersonal mode and Presentational mode. Thus, the four communicative skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are included. It is aimed at the use of language in exchanging information, expressing feelings and opinions, interpreting, presenting information, concepts and views on various matters, and creating interpersonal relationships appropriately

2. Culture: It is aimed at using of foreign languages harmonious with culture of native speakers; relationships, similarities and differences between languages and cultures of native speakers; languages and cultures of native speakers and Thai culture; and appropriate application

3. Connection or Language and Relationship with Other Learning Areas: use of foreign languages to link knowledge with other learning areas, forming the basis for further development, seeking knowledge and broadening learners' world views

4. Connection or Language and relationship with Community and the World: This strand aimed at the use of foreign languages in various situations, both in the classroom and the outside

community and the global society, forming a basic tool for further education, livelihood and exchange of learning with the global society.

Time allocation for English learning at primary level

The Basic Education Core Curriculum prescribes the framework for English learning time of 40 hours per one academic year in the foundation subjects. It means that the students in primary level of education will learn English at least 1 hour per week in grade 1 to grade 3, and 2 hours per week at grade 3 to grade 6. Moreover, it is allowed that the schools can create additional English courses as their needs.

Learning Areas / Activities	Learning Time (in hours)									
	Primary Education Level						Lower Secondary Education Level			Upper Secondary Education Level
	G 1	G 2	G 3	G 4	G 5	G 6	G 7	G 8	G 9	G 10-12
Foreign Languages	40	40	40	80	80	80	120 (3 crs)	120 (3 crs)	120 (3 crs)	240 (6 crs)
● <i>Additional courses/ activities provided by schools, depending on their readiness and priorities</i>	Not more than 40 hours for each year						Not more than 2 00 hours for each year			Not less than 1,600 hours
Total Learning Time	Not more than 1,000 hours for each year						Not more than 1,200 hours for each year			Not less than 3,600 hours for a total of 3 years

(Ministry of Education. 2008 : 25)

Current situation of English Teaching and Learning at primary level in Thailand

Learners

As students' achievement is a key component to indicate the success of education system, it is revealed that there has been the tendency on students' performance in the language study. There has been an evidence that students' achievement is dramatically improved but still lower than the criteria accepted. It is also found that the students still cannot communicate through English and use English as a tool for knowledge researching. Most students lack confidence in English using because they are afraid of mistakes and they have shy feeling.

Teachers

Teachers are one of the key factors that can bring success in education because they are the ones who transmit body of knowledge to their students. Teachers under the supervision of Basic Education Commission, whoever teach English have to take the test based on CEFR for their English ability. Then, they are placed into 6 levels as stated in CEFR : A1 to C 2 or beginner users, intermediate users and advanced users. Being an English teacher, ones need to be skillful of both knowledge of English content and the arts or crafts of teaching. It is the needs and requirements of teacher profession stipulated by The Teacher Council. Consequently, TKT or Teaching Knowledge Test was used to test teachers' knowledge in language teaching.

At present, the problems that are in consideration is that of the qualified teachers with English competency. More than 50 percent of Primary school teachers of English who are assigned to teach in all subjects including English, are non-majored of English but they earned their degrees in elementary education which English Teaching also included in the programme. They seem to lack confidence in delivering the English lesson and as a result, they don't succeed in their career of being an English teacher. The government has put their effort on improving the English competency among those by supporting them with the in-service training programme on English content and pedagogy.

Teaching and Learning Process

Teachers of English are trying hard in initiating the innovative ideas and in diversified of teaching process. They include thinking skills in their teaching and learning process. Besides, they

focus more on the chances for students to use language in the real context and situation by setting up the English learning activities such as the remedial teaching, English Camps, the enhancement of reading activities through English corners in schools. Nevertheless, those activities are not still implemented in all areas because of the limitation of teachers' capability and school milieu. Some teachers of English still use textbooks as a mean of their instructions and there are not a wide variety of language teaching methodologies. Less opportunities in language use in English classes is also found. As a result, the students find English is less important for them and will then it can form the negative attitude to language learning. Teachers preferred to teach reading and writing skills to teaching listening and speaking. Since the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been introduced, teachers in all schools in Thailand were trained to deliver the English lessons through the communicative language learning activities that focus on the interaction between the speakers, the language used in social contexts. The examples of those activities include as games, songs, role plays, TPR activities, information gaps activities, and so on.

Learning Materials

The use of textbooks and materials are varied among schools. Most of the texts were written by native writers, so it is assured that the language forms and linguistic features that used in the texts are correct. Teachers are more independent for the selecting of textbooks and learning materials, whatever software or electronic devices. What to be considered is that all learning materials have to align with the Basic Education Core Curriculum. The more the teachers use such materials, the more the students can access simultaneously into language learning.

What the Basic Education Commission helps promote the English Education at primary Level in Thailand

The English Language Institute, Basic Education Commission plays the vital roles in organizing the policy into practice. The projects on promoting English Language Education at primary level has been initiating as follow:

1. Reforming teaching and learning through Communicative approach

With the aims at raising public awareness and building up the bridge of understanding in changing of teaching practices, Communicative Teaching Approach is introduced for English teaching and learning. The more of activities have been promoting in many forms such as demonstrating and disseminating of best practice, the English Exhibition and the knowledge exchange at all levels of education and at all kinds of stakeholders – government sectors, private sectors, communities, and parents. These can be formed as the collaboration amongst those who involve in language education management. The budget on teacher trainings has been distributed to all Primary Educational Service Area Offices for the organizing of in-service teacher trainings during the school breaks. The contents of the trainings are those of the conception of CLT and its implementation in language classrooms, the framework of CEFR and its implications.

2. The development of the potential amongst teachers of English

As teacher is a key element to learning success, it is a must for elevating the teacher potential in content knowledge – that is the English competency. The Basic Education Commission launched the programme on teacher development by initiating in-service teacher trainings based on their levels of English abilities. The levels of teachers' English competency is developed in all levels – Basic Users, independent Users and advanced Users, and the ones who are in highly potential will be trained in the specified areas of study and skills. The latest project is launched and enacted in the fiscal year 2016 is that the Ministry of Education with the cooperation of British Council organize the in-service training by selecting 500 teachers of English who are placed as the advanced level in English competency to train on language teaching methodologies and take the “train the trainers course” later on.

3. Establishing equity in access to English teaching and learning

In order that the students in all education service areas have their chances to access into effectively English learning, the schools in all levels and all kinds have to be improved. The Model English Teaching Schools are created in all education service areas, the English and Mini English Programme schools are expanded at least one school per one area. The numbers of the English programme schools are dramatically increasing all over the country. Teaching materials and standard English textbooks are also provided to schools in far-reaching areas.

4. Developing English teaching and learning resources to support communicative approach

In order to develop teaching and learning resources to support Communicative Approach, the development of the following elements are involved:

4.1 The development of curriculum guidelines based on Common European Framework of References for Languages

The workshop and teacher training on how to implement the framework on CEFR are enacted in all education levels. The Ministry of Education produced the guidelines together with teacher manuals on how to create language activities based on CEFR for teachers. Besides, they also plan for the study on the curriculum production – that is to say – our student achievement and their performance.

4.2 The strengthening of Networking

The Primary Education English Resource Center (PEER) have been promoting in primary school level and in all Primary Educational Service Areas. The networking will help equip teachers of English with knowledge, ability, English skills using and also the management of teaching and learning. Through such activities, it helps promote the sharing of teaching experiences and human resources in the education service areas and also the forming of professional leaning community among teachers of English.

5. Creating an English learning atmosphere both in and outside the classrooms and increasing opportunities for English learning

The increasing of opportunities for learning both inside and outside the classroom has been creating in schools as the following:

1.1 The development of students' ability in English skills through the learning activities both inside and outside the classroom such as English camps, English contest and language talent activities are initiated.

1.2 The English Language Innovations has been creating through the ICT. Schools can help students naturally access in English. As the age of globalization, ICT plays much more roles in the world of communication and education as well as in English Education in Thailand. The learning materials in terms of ICT are provided among schools that are the English Networking schools nationwide. DLTV and Teacher TV are the examples of channels for teachers and students

who have the needs in English learning outside their classes. In addition, they can help solving the problems of teacher shortage. Some primary schools in rural and remote areas use the lessons broadcasted from DLTV in their English classes.

Recommendations:

For English has significantly impact on language study and it is crucial that the better preparation will lead to the accomplishment of language education. Success of English language learning and teaching requires the dedication and collaboration of all stakeholders – the government, the private sectors, the education institutions, the scholars, the cooperation from organizations of native speaking countries. More importantly, the teachers and students themselves should realize the important of mastering English as a means of communication in the global society and should bare in mind that all learners are not just the empty vessels to be filled with theoretical frameworks and skills but the recognition of interpreting them into effective practices with the awareness of appreciating their own cultures and local languages.

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