

PROPOSED TEACHER TRAINING FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This study recounts the planning and processes undertaken to produce English language trainers and teaching materials for Prathom teachers of English in the Udon Thani and surrounding areas. In order to conduct teacher training courses a framework of teacher trainers based on commercial pyramid selling techniques has been adopted with a view to encouraging schools to develop self sufficiency techniques whilst under the quality control guidelines agreed as part of the program.

This project is in its infancy and has only reached the planning stages; however, early indications are that there will be sufficient support to train four thousand teachers in a year, thus adopting the ethos of existing government educational policy and implementing it in additional areas that need attention.

Introduction

The proposed teacher training is to be initially conducted in the north east of Thailand, with the hope of further expansion at a later date. This area is predominantly an agricultural region consisting of primary school teachers who have not been afforded the necessary training in order to complete the task of English language teaching in accordance with government policy.

The majority of primary school teachers who teach English are qualified in other disciplines and rarely hold an English language degree or teaching degree, a problem highlighted by Pitiyanuwat (2007a). Training has consisted of intensive courses designed to inform existing teachers of new methodologies with a view to them being adopted in the classroom.

Problems have arisen due to both teachers and students not being confident with the concept of learner centred education, which has been promoted by recent government legislation as the way forward for Thailand. Intensive courses have been conducted for teachers to assist with this transition; however, there seems little evidence that they have worked effectively. Compounded by large class sizes and limited resources, primary school English language education has stagnated whilst the rest of the world is progressing in leaps and bounds.

In order for learner centred teaching to take place, teachers have to give up a degree of power (Bynom 2003) and whilst they may wish to appear in agreement with latest methodologies, in reality there is a reluctance to carry out these methodologies in the classroom. Rinvolucru (2007) states that there are various filters that hinder teachers

trying out new techniques in the classroom. These consist of personal likes and dislikes, the perception of the students, the teachers' professional beliefs and cultural filters. All of these will be examined in the Thai context to show the problems facing English language teaching at the primary level.

The Language Center at Udon Thani Rajabhat University, one of the oldest education institutes in north eastern Thailand has applied for funding to produce training for nearly 4000 primary school teachers of English over the period of approximately a year. A budget of 4 million baht has been requested to finance the project, allowing this community university, one of over forty dispersed around the country instigated by the King of Thailand, the opportunity to return to its core responsibility from days gone by as a teacher training establishment.

As in any management situation, people need to have a clear understanding of exactly what kind of innovation is needed to move forward and equally as important; the energy needs to be generated to make changes happen (Lucas 2007). If successful, it is hoped that this model can be adopted by the other Rajabhat universities to train teachers in their own areas and finally dispelling the generalisation that in Thailand “..teaching is something that people go into if they are unable to do anything else.” (Mackenzie 2002).

Basic education in Thailand

There are 14 years of free education in Thailand, 2 years of pre-primary, 6 years of primary and 6 years of secondary education. Of this, primary and the first 3 years of secondary education are compulsory. Importance has been given to shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, resulting in teachers needing to act as facilitators in order that students become more independent in thought, action and problem solving whilst still adhering to ethical and moral values of society (Office of the Education Council 2006).

External quality assurance of basic education in Thailand became the responsibility of a public organisation called the Office of National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) in November 2000. Since 2000 there have been teacher shortages due to a government strategy of early retirement to reduce the number of government officers and teachers in the education industry.

Dr. Somwung Pitayanuwat, the Director of ONESQA stated in an interview in the Bangkok Post (Johnson 2006) that out of the 40,000 schools in Thailand that had been assessed so far, 30,000 were in a “qualitative coma.”

In addition, Dr. Somwung insists that Thai students are good and happy children; however, he believes that they lack the ability to carry out research. Some educational commentators would suggest that students' education is further hindered by a half day school policy allowing students to spend half the day doing leisure activities due to the stress and strain of the new curriculum adopted in 2001 (Pitayanuwat 2007b).

Wiriyachitra (2002) states that Thai learners think that English is too challenging for them to be competent due to:

1. L1 interference.
2. Lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom.
3. English lessons not challenging enough.
4. Being passive learners.
5. Too shy to speak English with classmates.
6. Lack of responsibility for their own learning.

In addition, Mackenzie (2002), after discussions with Thai language teachers, states that students were repeatedly categorised as lacking a willingness to speak due to a culturally biased seniority system and shyness as well as having an over-emphasis on accuracy and an ingrained attachment to rote memorization.

In order to overcome these perceived problems, Wiriyachitra (2003) suggests that Thai teachers can help students to see the value of English and then promote learning to provide them with the opportunity to learn. In addition, teachers can help students to enjoy learning by creating the best learning environment possible. Motivation of learners is important, especially if students are not used to success in a subject. Once they have tasted success, they will be motivated to succeed further (Yule 1996).

There is a need for teachers to set a good example for their students to follow. In the classroom, one way this can be achieved is for teachers to speak English when they are teaching the English language. Often, there is a reluctance to do this as teachers do not feel confident and fear losing face in front of the class. Teacher talk is very important if new methodologies are to be adopted as students need to understand how to do the activities (Taylor 2007). “Tasks are an interface between teachers and students; it is through a task that they communicate with each other.”(Littlejohn 1996).

Fossilisation is a long term problem, especially in Thailand. At university students are still having problems with articles and plural nouns (Lush 2002), something that needs to be addressed from primary through secondary and then on to tertiary levels of education. Baldwin (2007) highlights errors, mistakes and self correction as areas that need understanding in order to combat fossilisation on multiple levels.

Phipps and Borg (2007) cite Lortie (1975) and Pickering (2005) when detailing the relationships between teacher education, teachers’ beliefs and classroom practice. Teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning:

1. may be powerfully influenced (positively or negatively) by teachers’ own experiences as learners and well established by the time teachers go to university (Lortie 1975);
2. strongly influence what and how teachers learn during teacher education;
3. may outweigh the effects of teacher education in influencing what teachers do in the classroom (hence the old adage; “teachers teach as they are taught, not as they are taught to teach);
4. can be deep-rooted and resistant to change (Pickering 2005);
5. can exert a persistent long-term influence on teachers’ instructional practices;
6. are, at the same time, not always reflected in what teachers do in the classroom.

A comparison between Phipps and Borg (2007) and Rinvoluceri (2007) shows common areas which are universal, though very Thailand specific in nature. Watzke (2007) emphasises that new teachers may try out activities whilst reverting to more teacher centred activities in the hope of keeping control. This also applies to experienced teachers who are used to focusing on student learning goals concerning the knowledge about the language and instruction based on rote memorisation, grammar and vocabulary.

For too long now, teachers have been struggling with large classes and limited resources (One study by Wannapiro and Luksaneeyanawin (2005) gave large class sizes as one reason why teachers are not able to use the learner centred approach); however, there are techniques that require training, that will allow teachers to give the students the opportunity to use the language (Renaud et al. 2007), albeit only in the classroom (Boriboon 2004). There is still limited time when English can be actually used outside the classroom for a real purpose in rural areas of Thailand.

Proposed teacher training

Reference was made in the abstract that the use of commercial pyramid selling techniques was to be a model for this project. Amway Corps. (2005) is quick to point out that their company is a multilevel or network marketing company and is not a pyramid scheme which they state is an illegal scam. Valentine (1998) defines the illegal practice of pyramid selling and Wikipedia (2007) compares the differences between multilevel marketing and pyramid selling. The legitimacy of these practices is outside the scope of this paper; however, the idea of using a network the shape of a pyramid to build a structure capable of training and supervising 3905 teachers over the period of approximately a year appears attractive.

Stage	Timetable	Numbers	Sub-Totals	Totals
1	Week 1	5	0	5
2	Week 12	25	5	30
3	Week 24	125	30	155
4	Week 36	625	155	780
5	Week 48	3125	780	3905

From the above table, it is noticeable that columns headed Numbers, Sub-Totals and Totals are shaped like pyramids. This is a result of five administrators/teachers being trained by Udon Thani Rajabhat University and they themselves training five teachers each and they teach five and so on.

The strategy of this training is in line with The Ministry of Education's ELT strategies (British Council 2006) containing five objectives:

1. To develop teachers' English language skills and equip them with English language teaching tools.
2. To encourage schools to develop its English language teaching and learning methods.
3. To provide students English language skills that can be adapted to more various situations.

4. To strengthen English language teaching and learning resources and network so that the network can accomplish its mission.
5. To develop teaching methodology and evaluation for English language classes with modern instruction media.

Primary school teachers of English would have at some stage undertaken some sort of intensive training in the past to help them with the task of teaching English to their classes. These have proved to be useful; however, when they are over, there is no support for the teacher when they return to their place of work. Tomlinson (2002) explains the dangers of short in-service courses. The result is that participants:

1. resist the new ideas because they feel they have been unfairly attacked for using old-fashioned methods and materials; OR
2. fear and reject the new ideas because they see them as a threat to the self esteem and security they have built up over many years; OR
3. dissociate themselves from the new ideas for fear of being seen as radical and subversive by the authorities in their system; OR
4. are persuaded to try the new ideas and then feel guilty when they abandon them after their initial failures to apply them successfully in the classroom; OR
5. are so convinced of the value of the new wisdom that they rush back to their schools with revolutionary zeal and unthinkingly impose methods and materials from their in-service course on the bewildered students before having to revert to their old approach when the received supply of materials and ideas run out; OR
6. become total converts to the new approach and fail to see the inappropriacy of some of its aspects to the realities of their teaching situation.

Whilst this teacher training is being planned it is important to take into account all the above points with a view to preventing the problems before they happen. When looking at criteria and a possible model for this professional development, Mitsaki (2007) emphasises problem prevention rather than problem solving by:

1. Establishing collaborative supervisory roles in a non threatening working environment.
2. Involving teachers in the design and execution of the seminars.
3. Short task based seminars allowing for teacher participation.
4. Classroom observations.
5. Presenting high quality or innovative work as a way of recognition.
6. Questionnaire regarding teacher development.

This will form the basis of the project; however, there is a deep-rooted need for continued support until the time when the teacher feels confident to continue unaided. The trainees need support and will receive scaffolding from Udon Thani Rajabhat University and the first five administrators/teachers who have an important part to play in the training process. Too many times in the past, teachers have attended short courses and then been left on their own to introduce these new practices into their teaching repertoire. The use of scaffolding in this case is not just to complete a task. It is vital to support all the teachers until they can teach and train on their own.

Prapphal (2005) suggests that in order for teachers to keep up with current trends the following components must be included in the syllabus:

1. Language Development.
2. Current trends in language teaching and learning.
3. Effective ways of using teaching and learning materials.
4. Methodology in language teaching.
5. Assessment and evaluation.

The communicative approach to English language teaching is dominant throughout the world today; however, students in Thailand have to be trained in order to benefit from these activities as they are more used to teacher centred activities, involving grammar intensive study and rote learning. Course planners have to take into account various cross cultural communication challenges when developing the courses for teachers and the materials that will be used by the teachers in the classroom.

Williams (1992) warns that it is time that teachers turned their attention to cross cultural competence when teaching a balanced curriculum as opposed to one that emphasises oral skills. DuPaw and Axner (1997) have provided six fundamental patterns of cultural difference that need to be addressed when designing the teacher training course and also for providing materials for inclusion in the classroom. An eclectic view to the communicative approach is needed if it is to be adopted successfully for the communication needed in Thailand.

1. Communication Styles
2. Attitudes Toward Conflict
3. Approaches to Completing Tasks
4. Decision Making Styles
5. Attitudes Toward Disclosure
6. Approaches to Knowing

Whilst adapting communicative language teaching (CLT) in classrooms, Bilash and Kwangsawad (2004) noted six factors which influenced Thai teachers' abilities to adapt. Teachers must understand CLT and be willing to commit extra out of ours class time. Moreover, they need to overcome their doubts and limitations namely by requiring a number of supports in order to succeed as well as more time to prepare materials and work with mentors. Finally, they must be involved in collaborative action research for "deep professional development."

In addition there is the possibility that a "good enough" approach to language comprehension (Ferreira and Patson 2007) will mean that local interpretations rather than global ones will interfere with the intended meaning of activities. Whilst it is important to have a global understanding of the English language in accordance with Contents and Standards of Learning in The Basic Education Curriculum B.D.2544 (The Teaching and Learning Management for the English Program using the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Project Administrative Committee 2006) it is important to stress that activities must be meaningful and that it will be the responsibility of teachers to learn how to combine activities in a way that covers both local issues and

global ones. Therefore an eclectic view to the communicative approach is needed if it is to be adopted successfully in Thailand.

To overcome the problems of insecurity and cultural conflicts (Iemjinda 2005), mentoring has become an important part of teacher training and this project. Mentors need to understand the problems that both experienced and inexperienced teachers will face when adapting their teaching to incorporate new methodologies. Van Theilen (1993) emphasises the need to recognise the following problem areas:

1. Initial planning.
2. Designing basic classroom procedures.
3. Using effective language.
4. Balancing the whole instructional programme.
5. Integrating with the rest of the staff.

Mittica (2003) observes that a team approach to mentoring will have benefits to mentors and novice teachers in an ESL environment. Due to the cultural background of the teachers, it would not be difficult to adopt this tactic for existing teachers as mentoring mirrors the social standing in Thai custom. If the teachers are part of the support system and corrective process, they can go one stage further than Mittica (2003) has put forward and become mentors themselves. This way inexperienced teachers will be more positive, whilst the experienced teachers will be reassured that their experience and competence are needed (Van Theilen 1993).

For this to be successful, the purpose of the mentoring must be clear and support given to all the teachers, detailed by Ratanavipak (2000) not just when they attend their initial course but throughout the initial year and beyond. This will include the materials, "Prototype Teachers" and "Core Teachers" who will progress to a mentor status. The scaffolding technique will gradually fade away once the mentors and teachers gain confidence and are able to cope on their own.

Once again, it is very important to reflect on what teachers who have attended previous intensive training courses think about the training offered and the difficulties they found. Mackenzie (2004) recounts the development of teachers in Surin, an area similar to where this project will take place giving insight to the development of the curriculum and teachers' perceptions.

Course books and supplementary materials need to reflect the curriculum and must contain modern English language examples and exercises that are used in real life situations and not resort to locally produced materials that contain old fashioned English not in use today (Graham 2006). In addition, no matter how good the materials are, learner centeredness will not take place if the teachers' role remains unchanged (Yuxiang and Jiling 2007).

Materials to be used for the course are under consideration and are the subject of further research as materials used to train teachers will be used by them to teach their students. It is anticipated that photocopiable materials will be permitted by companies to be used for this training and the training of students in government schools on the understanding that no profit will be made. This in itself is a very difficult task; however, it is an important step in recognising the legitimacy of the project. In south

east Asia copyright laws are not strictly enforced. With the commitment of the teachers and administrators concerned and the costs of staging frequent follow up sessions borne by those attending and the benefiting schools, it is predicted that the budget will suffice; however, it will not be easy. The cost of training equates to approximately US\$30 per student.

To assist in the documentation of this project, it is proposed, with the teachers consent, to have everyone keep a journal of their studies, a portfolio of their teaching and training and video of selected classes for quality control. Staff from the university will be used in conjunction with the first 155 teachers trained to collate data for quality control purposes and visit training sites.

Discussion

Learner centeredness is an approach rather than a method, so does not deliver concrete procedures for teachers to follow (Yuxiang and Jiling 2007). Teachers will need to use their imagination and be flexible and adaptable if this project is to succeed. Hwang and Huang (2007) have put forward Cooperative Learning (CL) as a way to build individual and group responsibility enabling all members to achieve success. This is based on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and these strategies are often found in communicative language teaching.

If the teacher trainers have a good rapport with the teachers and possess a degree of charisma, teachers' beliefs about teaching may be modified by what has been imparted to them. However, teachers will be more deeply influenced by the way the trainer is and by the example that is given (Rinvoluceri 2007).

Senior (2006) identifies class centred language teaching as a means to not only teach effectively, but also to encourage the class to function as cohesively as possible. This way, the quality of the class group is related to the quality of the learning that has taken place within it. Culturally, this works well with Thai classes as being part of the peer group is considered by some to be extremely important and worth considering for students and teachers alike.

The Socratic Method or use of elicitation is a good way to allow students and teachers to explore and expand their knowledge rather than just to test their understanding. Culturally this causes a problem in Thailand (Conlon 2005) for the following reasons:

1. It is rude to ask questions of a teacher.
2. To answer a question is considered showing off.
3. A teacher should already know the answer.
4. It is impolite for a student to express their opinion.
5. Knowledge is found in books.
6. Classroom activities consist of a teacher reading the book and students completing the exercises.
7. Teacher – student interaction is based on confirming that the student knows what is in the book and what the teacher knows.

Foley (2005) states that Buddhism influences the way Thai teachers or learners approach any subject; simplistically, karma, status and respect. Graham (2006) asks

why the Kalama Sutra (the criterion for rejection and criterion for acceptance) does not play a more important part by making individuals ask questions of everything. From these two viewpoints there does not seem to be a clear reason why Thai students appear so passive.

Another consideration is that whilst Thai students are very fun-loving, in a typical Thai classroom there is not much emphasis on humour. It is a well known fact that students who laugh often tend to be less anxious learners and will have a more positive attitude toward learning English (Muqun and Lu 2006). It is hoped that this will be true of the teachers who will be trained and the students who will benefit when the teachers use the new methodologies.

One further area of discussion is that of allowing the information that is gleaned from the teacher training courses to cascade down to those who need it most (Wiriyachitra 2002). There is a problem in Thailand of individuals keeping information for themselves and not passing it on for the good and benefit of all concerned. "Dykes continue to be erected by those who see themselves at the upper end of society to keep those below from sharing in the good life and political power." (White 2007).

To counter this, teachers selected for training will have to be chosen using strict criteria which does not necessarily mean that the best English users are successful. What is needed are dedicated teachers who have the ethos of the project at heart and are willing to sacrifice their time and money in order to fulfil the promise that this project can potentially deliver.

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