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CHALLENGES OF USING ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION (EMI) IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This article aims to review the situation of English education in Thailand at present. Thailand has put much effort into improving Thai people's English proficiency all along. Even if various reforms in education, policies, and initiatives concerning English language teaching have been launched to develop the abilities of English-speaking Thais, slow progress has been made. Thai English proficiency remains among the lowest, despite government efforts from the past to the present. As globalization has accelerated due to transportation and technological advances, the use of English has occupied a major role in international communication. Using English as a medium of instruction has also been a goal of the Thai government. However, no matter how hard the previous and current governments have tried to improve the Thai people's English competence, it seems the Thai people's proficiency is always behind. This article discusses why Thai people remain incompetent in English and what the factors impeding Thailand's ability to use English as a medium of instruction are. Also, ideas are given for how Thailand could get past the English language fallacy and become a country where English is used to teach.

Keywords

English as a Medium of Instruction, EMI, English proficiency, English

1. Introduction

As globalization rapidly expands, English establishes itself as a global lingua franca and assumes a primary medium of communication. As a result of it, English has infiltrated into teaching methods, and English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been prevalently adopted. Schools and universities all over the world offer English-mediated instruction programs in response to the demand for employment in various sectors that require high English proficiency. Teaching all academic subjects in English is an ultimate goal for many non-English-speaking countries, including Thailand. The embracement of English as a medium of instruction could promote the Thai population's high proficiency in English and give them an advantageous stance in the global job competition. However, though Thailand has been trying for decades to be so, it is still far from the goal. This article will discuss why Thailand has yet to be a country using English as a medium of instruction.

English as a medium of instruction is defined as the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the majority of the population's first language (L1) is not English (British Council, 2014).

In this article, I primarily exemplify Thailand, as it is where I was born, studied, and have been an English teacher for many years. In Thailand, Thai is the only official language, and English has its own position as a foreign language. The previous and current governments have been putting in a great deal of effort to improve English proficiency in Thai learners by implementing English as a mandatory subject in all levels of education, from primary to tertiary, and providing budgets to support many kinds of English-related projects in schools and universities as well as institutions. In 2010, English was used as the medium of instruction in over 880 international education programs across the country. This represents a 50% increase since 2004 (Hengsadeeikul, Hengsadeeikul, Koul, & Kaewkuekool, 2010). The Education Ministry received approximately 371.5 billion baht in 2010, and the current education budget, which accounts for 29 percent of total spending, is one of the world's highest (Kaur, Young & Kirkpatrick, 2016). According to Sermsongswad and Tantipongsanurak (2013), since English language teaching was introduced into Thai education in 1891, Thailand's English curricula have been continuously developed.

English was made mandatory for all primary school grades in the 1996 curriculum. In the late 1970s, the Education Ministry was aware of communicative methods of teaching English, but they were not included in the English curriculum until 1996 (Punthumasen, 2007). But many schools had trouble using communicative methods because their teachers did not speak English very well (Kaur, Young, and Kirkpatrick, 2016).

2. Literature Review

This section is to review related literature to this article. The article is about English education in Thailand; accordingly, the section includes English education in Thailand, teachers, and Thais' English proficiency.

2.1. English Education in Thailand

Since it was announced that English would be the sole official language of ASEAN, the English language has played an increasingly important role in Thailand. Schools were encouraged to establish bilingual programs in 2005, in which the core subjects were taught in English (Sermsonswad and Tantipongsanurak, 2013). Since 1981, Thailand's English curricula have been revised numerous times in an attempt to raise standards and facilitate learning in order to meet the needs of the country at the time. The curriculum is frequently changed, causing practitioners to be perplexed and uncertain. Even though each curriculum had good intentions to improve students' English skills, there was often a disconnect between policy and practice. This was caused by a number of things, such as a lack of clear and detailed guidelines for implementing the curriculum, problems with using new teaching methods, teachers' lack of understanding of the theories and principles behind them, and the fact that teachers didn't have good relationships with each other (Cheewakaroon, 2011).

2.2. Teachers

Teachers are also heavily criticized as a major cause of the failure of English education in Thailand, and they are always the target of any educational reform. Teachers in Thailand work long hours and have many responsibilities (Dhanasobhon, 2007). However, we must acknowledge that, in many ways, English language teachers influence the success or failure of English education. The first is the presence of so many unqualified teachers due to their insufficient English language skills and cultural understanding of native speakers. According to a 2009 MOE report, 31.7 percent of teachers were proficient in basic English, 64.4 percent were proficient in

intermediate English, and only 3.9 percent were proficient in advanced English. The University of Cambridge reported in 2006 in a survey to launch a new course and qualifications for non-native English teachers that 60 percent of Thai teachers' knowledge of the language and teaching methodology was below the syllabus level they were teaching (Kaur, Young & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Only 3% of the remaining 40% had a reasonable level of fluency, and only 20% were teaching students in the grades for which they were qualified (Sermsonswad and Tantipongsanurak, 2013). Furthermore, according to Noopong (2002), 65 percent of elementary school teachers who taught English were not English majors, and several of them conceded that they were forced to teach English despite having little or no knowledge of the language. According to Punthumasen (2007), the majority of non-Thai nationality teachers did not finish their degrees in teacher education and did not major in the subject they teach. Prospects for an educational career in Thailand do not entice English major graduates to work in schools because teacher salaries are low. The majority of them would rather work in higher-paying jobs such as cabin crew, hotel employees, and private enterprise officers (Dhanasobhon 2006 cited in Sermsonswad and Tantipongsanurak, 2013). Furthermore, Thai teachers have excessive academic loads (Dhanasobhon, 2007). Most of them work at least 18 hours a week and are appointed to aid in other roles in the school. They also have to teach extra classes outside of school hours to augment their low salary. Moreover, they teach a course of 45–60 students at the school, which is regarded as too large for an English class. Each teacher is responsible for very many students (Sermsonswad and Tantipongsanurak, 2013).

2.3. Thais' English Proficiency

According to English First's latest English proficiency index, Thailand is ranked 89th, which is categorized in the 'very low proficiency' level ('EF EPI 2020-EF English Proficiency Index', 2021). Even though since the education reform plan was first introduced in 1999, nearly 20% of the country's fiscal budget has been allocated to education ('Education budget to be held to account', 2020), Thai English proficiency is low (Bolton, 2008; Prapphal, 2014; Ruanklai & Yodmongkol, 2017) and still ranked 20th out of 24 countries in Asia (Ang, 2021). These figures underline the failure of the national education system in Thailand. Prior studies discovered that students fail to reach English competency primarily due to a lack of communicative language strategies and learning environments; a greater emphasis on receptive language skills and knowledge of English grammar for examination; insufficient practice of productive language

skills; a lack of daily chances to develop English; and a lack of self-confidence in using English (Hengsadeeikul, Hengsadeeikul, Koul & Kaewkuekool, 2010).

3. Discussion

There are English-medium instruction programs in a number of institutions because most Thai people who want to learn English cannot use it in everyday life. In my opinion, it is not an easy path to make Thailand a country of English-mediated instruction while all academic subjects have been taught in Thai for decades. There are only a few schools that deliver all modules in English, and their tuition fees are expensive, such as English programs in schools, international schools, and international programs in universities. These educational institutions hire qualified teachers with very high salaries (that is why the tuition fees are expensive), and their students are mostly from wealthy families. Unfortunately, the majority of Thai people are poor. With only one percent of the population possessing 66.9% of the country's wealth (Khidhir, 2018), the rich-poor divide is enormous. In 2018, Thailand scored 90.2 on the Gini index, according to a report released at the beginning of the year by the Credit Suisse Research Institute titled "The Global Wealth Report 2018." This made it the ASEAN country with the highest income disparity and one of the four worst performers on a global scale, alongside Ukraine (95.5), Kazakhstan (95.2), and Egypt (90.9) (The ASEAN Post Team, 2020; Ariyaarpakamol, 2019; Maneejuk, Yamaka & Sriboonchitta, 2019)

In Thailand, only rich people can access good education, and 'good education' here includes education with English-mediated instruction. This means most Thai students do not have access to education with English as a medium of instruction (EMI). In Thailand, EMI also results in a disparity in education because most education programs cannot provide EMI due to the problems of teachers, resources, and students' English backgrounds. Most Thai students learn all subjects in Thai in school. In many schools, even the English subjects are taught in only Thai and, even worse, by poorly-trained and unqualified Thai teachers (Noom-ura, 2013). We cannot deny that many of our English teachers who have passed the national test to recruit teachers cannot deliver lessons in English. They do not speak fluently enough to do so. The first reason is that they have been taught English with Thai by Thai teachers for their whole life. Secondly, the national exam for recruiting teachers is the paper exam, focusing on grammar, writing, reading, and vocabulary (Kongkerd, 2013); the candidate can pass the exam without having to be fluent in

English. So, if the teachers can't speak fluently, how can they expect their students to? Third, learning environments do not promote second language acquisition. Even English teachers are not able to deliver lessons in English. To expect other teachers in other areas of expertise to teach by using English as a medium of instruction seems unreal. They might be very good at their subjects, but they were taught these subjects in Thai. How could they deliver them in English? It is clear that we don't have enough qualified teachers who are also fluent in English (Dhanasobhon, 2007).

Nonetheless, Thailand is not the only country that encounters EMI problems due to globalization. In a world where English assumes the position of a lingua franca, many countries try to accentuate English language learning by adopting English-mediated instruction as one of the means to enhance the language proficiency of their people as well. For example, in South Africa, where EMI was adopted, it was estimated that some three-quarters of children, or more depending on how you read the statistics, failed school (Heugh, 2000). This is particularly important when fluency in the 'adopted' teaching language might be low amongst learners as well as teachers. According to Marsh (2006), problems resulting from EMI were by no means specific to developing countries or those which were undergoing rapid educational overhauls in response to globalization. The British Council undertook a case study of EMI in Turkey and Kazakhstan in 2013-2014. Turkey was an example of a country where the trend toward EMI in state schools was reversed. In the early days, the prestige state Anadolu High Schools used EMI during the first year, but this system was eliminated a few years ago, according to Turkey informants, because students were underperforming in Science and Mathematics. Respondents in Kazakhstan revealed that the majority of institutions were having problems with EMI teaching resources. Older teachers may not be fluent in English. In 2010, the British Council and the BISAM Central Asia agency discovered that only 4% of university faculties in Kazakhstan were fluent in English (British Council, 2014). Following the British Council's report, many problems with teaching and learning through EMI have been reported, such as a lack of EMI teachers. In the preliminary study, teachers were found to have limited self-experience or no preceding comprehension of the implications of teaching through EMI, as well as limited resources and clear guidance for teaching; confusing exams and assessment; and standard levels of English for EMI teachers, to mention a few. Furthermore, Turkish university teachers voiced concern about EMI, believing that it impaired a student's capacity to understand ideas and resulted in a lack of knowledge of the subject studied. Teachers indicated that EMI took too long to teach the curriculum, that it caused a sense

of alienation and isolation, and that it diminished student engagement in the classroom due to students' low English proficiency (British Council, 2014). These studies show that embracing EMI while not ready yields negative results.

Globalization requires countries to embrace EMI, but not every country can take it up and make an effective move. Thailand is one of the countries that is yet to embrace EMI because we have insufficient qualified teachers, students with low English proficiency, and unsupportive government policies. According to my informal interviews with a just-retired teacher who used to teach in a state primary school in a rural area of the south of Thailand for more than thirty years and a primary teacher who is currently working in a state school in a rural area in the northeastern of Thailand, they said that many teachers in rural schools have to teach all subjects according to the recruitment policy from the government, which is in line with Noopong (2002), who points out that primary teachers are required to teach the subjects they do not major in. In the Thai education system, it is calculated by the Primary Educational Service Area Office (PEASO) from student numbers to designate how many teachers a school can have. The PEASO is a state organization that works as a supervisor for all state primary schools in its service area. A province is counted as an area, such as Suratthani PEASO. In the past, a school could not specifically ask the PEASO for a primary teacher who specialized in a subject. What a school could do if there was a vacancy was to inform the PEASO that they had a vacancy for a primary teacher. If a primary teacher, regardless of the area of expertise, requested to transfer to this school, he or she could not transfer there by the regulations, as there were no regulations about majors, only the degree in primary education mattered. In other words, it appeared that primary education was viewed as a simple level of education; thus, majors were unimportant, and primary teachers were expected to be able to teach every subject. This practice has been going on for decades. Nowadays, a school can ask for a teacher with a specific major, but the problem is still there. Let me explain why. If a school lacks an English teacher but the position is filled because, following the student number of the school, the school cannot ask for more teachers even though all the teachers that this school has do not major in English. In Thai state schools, where newly recruited teachers are assigned to work depending on their scores on the test, the highest scorers can choose the school first, and most of the time, they will choose the ones near their home or the well-known ones. Consequently, there are a lot of newly recruited teachers who have to teach in a school located far away from their home. But after four years of teaching at the first place, they can ask to be moved.

Suppose that ten years ago, School A lacked a primary English teacher and that position was filled by a primary teacher whose area of expertise was not English. So far, this teacher has still taught at this school and he or she does not want to transfer to any other school because this school is close to their home or they have already settled (such as having a family). Hence, the position remains full. Even if School A lacks an English teacher, it cannot ask for one from the PEASO by following the primary education regulations. The number of teachers in state schools strictly depends on the number of students in the school. It is about the budget because state school teachers are civil servants and civil servants get paid by the government. Therefore, primary students have no choice; they have to study all subjects with teachers who do not specialize in what they teach. In my view, problems in Thai education are deeply rooted and hard to get rid of. The problems have resulted from the unpractical and centralized policies of Thai education from the past to the present. This is an example of problems in the Thai education system, and I have yet to relate them to political turmoil, corruption, or bribes, which have been rooted in Thai society as well, including the education sector. These problems are all related to the failure of English education in Thailand.

4. Conclusion

Making Thailand become an EMI country is a very challenging task as the education system does not support using English as a medium of instruction. To become an EMI country, we need to get prepared in every aspect, e.g., workforce, resources, education systems/policies, students and teachers' English proficiency, etc. In my view, to overcome the challenges of using English-mediated instruction in Thailand, first and foremost, it has to start with kindergarten teachers and move to university teachers. That is, all teachers in all subjects should be required to teach in English. When we get started early in using the English language in the classroom, we will not be shy about speaking as we are familiar with the language. Shyness is a learning style of Asian students, according to many studies (Wong, 2004; Loh and Teo, 2017), and it is also one of the factors that influences communicative skills (Triwittayayon & Sarobol, 2018). In accordance with Hengsadekul, Hengsadekul, Koul, & Kaewkuekool (2010), who pointed out earlier, students lack confidence in using English because they have little opportunity to practice it daily. Many studies show that in order to be fluent in the communicative skill, students must be exposed to English-speaking environments (Krashen and Terrell, 1998), where they can practice speaking

as well as listening. Exposure is one of the most influential factors in developing communicative skills (Triwittayayon & Sarobol, 2018; Oradee, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2005).

To train teachers, I propose that the government support the budget for teacher training on English language proficiency, which could be one-year, two-year training or more, and after the training, teachers must pass tests that assess their potential to execute classes in English (not just the capacity to speak English in general). There should be proficiency levels such as A1, A2, A3, A4. For example, each level that teachers pass results in a percentage increase in their salary. At present, there is no such training. Regarding this, the government is required to put a considerable and constant budget into the education system. This process would take time; it could be ten years, twenty years, or more, but we have nothing to lose, because for the past twenty years that we have put considerable budgets into making Thai people better at English, nothing has been better. We have been ranked worse in English proficiency. Additionally, teachers can improve their English by themselves by reading English, watching English news and movies, and so on in their daily lives. We cannot only rely on imported foreign teachers because they are few and they are not likely to accept a job in rural schools, where they are less likely to have a budget to hire foreign teachers. Most foreign teachers teach in the cities, but our Thai teachers are assigned to teach in schools all over the country. If one major reason we cannot use English as a medium of instruction is poorly-trained teachers, then train them. If the teacher problems in Thailand were solved and students all over the country were taught in English in all subjects since kindergarten, and they would grow up being familiar with using English, the problem of insufficient English background would be eliminated. Then, it would be easy to input students with specialized knowledge, but first the teachers have to be very good at English. If we have the requirements that teachers need to meet in order to get a promotion or a raise, and if we support them to teach in English with a supportive work system and access to useful teaching materials, I believe making English a medium of instruction is not a dream that is too far to reach for Thailand.

4.1. Research limitations

This paper is a review paper; there are no statistical results. Further empirical research is encouraged.

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