

## English Language Education in Thailand and AEC 2015

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### Abstract

This paper will shed light on how Thailand, which is a key player in ASEAN should reposition itself to the English language and education needs of AEC 2015. I will provide a brief overview ASEAN 2015 and examine the current status of English language teaching in Thailand before considering the role of English in education. I will introduce the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and point out the differences between the time honored tradition of using English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) before calling for an overhaul of policies, methods, materials and testing which are essential for the nation's success in ASEAN.

*Keywords: English language teaching, education, ELF and EFL*

### 1. Introduction

ASEAN (Association of South East Nations) was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia joined later making up what is today the ten Member States of ASEAN. The three pillars of ASEAN Community 2015 are: ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Each pillar has its own Blueprint, and, together with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework and IAI Work Plan Phase II (2009-2015), they form the Road map for the ASEAN Community 2009-2015.

Although the degree of English use in education and other domains varies within each member nation, it is worth noting that English is the official language of ASEAN which implies that all meetings and proceedings are conducted in English. The table below shows the distribution of English across ASEAN countries.

**Table 1:** English in ASEAN

Society	Approx. population	% of English speakers	Approx. totals
<b>Philippines</b>	91 million	48%	44 million
<b>Malaysia</b>	25 million	32%	8 million
<b>Singapore</b>	4.5 million	50%	2.2 million
<b>Brunei</b>	0.4 million	39%	0.1 million
<b>Indonesia</b>	234 million	5%	12 million
<b>Thailand</b>	65 million	10%	6.5 million
<b>Myanmar</b>	47 million	5%	2.4 million
<b>Cambodia</b>	14 million	5%	0.7 million
<b>Laos</b>	6.5 million	5%	0.3 million

Source: Bolton (2008)

According to a 2011 Reuters report, it was found that out of all the Southeast Asian countries, Thailand allocates the highest amount for education in its National Plan. It is also reported that while countries have invested large amounts of money for developing world-class universities, Thailand “has moved little beyond a decades-old system that aims mostly to preserve national identity” (Ahuja, 2011). In a recent report in the *Bangkok Post* (15.11.2013), former Head of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Surin Pitsuwan observes the need for Thais to go beyond national pride in the context of ASEAN 2015: “ We (Thais) keep holding on to our pride that Thailand has never been colonised as a justification to remain contented despite our shortfalls, such as poor English proficiency and lack of competitiveness”. In a report published in *The Nation* on 14 May 2015, Thailand trails behind two Southeast Asian nations in the biggest-ever global ranking of education quality. Thailand takes the 47<sup>th</sup> place while Vietnam took the 12<sup>th</sup> place and Singapore emerged as the world’s best in Science and Mathematics. It is quite surprising to note that despite the increase of English teaching in schools and in other domains the English proficiency of the vast majority of Thais remains poor. The TOEFL scores of Asian countries in the following table are useful to understand Thailand’s problems in English.

**Table 2:** TOEFL Scores in ASEAN

Country	Paper-based (computer-based)
<b>Singapore</b>	---- (255)
<b>Malaysia</b>	572 (232)
<b>Philippines</b>	566 (238)
<b>Indonesia</b>	535 (214)
<b>Vietnam</b>	534 (207)
<b>Myanmar</b>	518 (206)
<b>Cambodia</b>	---- (206)
<b>Thailand</b>	500 (200)

Source: Bolton (2008)

It is worth looking at the major cultural and linguistic reasons for Thai learners’ poor proficiency in English. Although there could be several cultural factors, the discussion in this paper is restricted to ‘collectivism’, ‘hierarchy’ and ‘shyness’.

## 2. Cultural Reasons

### 2.1 Collectivism

Thailand is a highly collectivist society which is evident from family values and people’s belonging to groups. Relationships in which individuals assume responsibility for other members of the group are strongly supported by the society including education. However the different aspects of collectivism should be addressed as opposed to viewing collectivism in Thai culture as a single issue.

Mulder (1997) states that community leaders and parents are considered to be exemplars of society. It is also observed that persons who act according to their whims and fancies are likely to cause disorder in society through quarrels, unhealthy competition and strife. On the other hand, willingness to sacrifice is an obligation to the family which is

considered to be a microcosm of the society. Hence the preservation of these values is achieved by means of a clear hierarchy in both family and society.

## **2.2 Hierarchy**

Although Thai people are friendly, humane and caring, there is an underlying hierarchy which governs formal and informal relationships in Thai society based on several factors such as age, position, education and economic status. According to Mulder (1997), this hierarchy requires order, cooperation (as part of collectivism), politeness, honesty, clemency, kindness or concern among family members who must mutually forgive each other.

For instance, teachers are superior to students and therefore questioning teachers will be construed as impolite, if not rude. The same applies to parents and children or employers and employees not to mention other relationships where there is a clear socio-economic divide.

## **2.3 Shyness**

Social embarrassment or ‘face loss’ perceived as threat to one’s social identity can lead to anxiety (Tanveer, 2008). This threat has, in fact, been shown to relate more significantly to proficiency in a second language than instrumental or integrative motivation (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2000).

The issues discussed above may not be just applicable for Thai society, but for other agrarian and collectivist societies in Asia or rest of the world. However, these issues manifest to a stronger degree in Thai ways of life including education and language teaching in particular. In the following section, I will point out a few linguistic and pedagogic reasons which tend to overlap or fit into some of the cultural factors discussed so far.

## **3. Linguistic Reasons**

Kirkpatrick (2010) points out that the role of English and other languages in Thailand and the rest of ASEAN will inevitably change with the upcoming AEC 2015 when English will be the lingua franca accounting for business and cultural interactions among the so called non-native English speakers of the region. As mentioned by Jenkins (2007: 159), “many of those who start up thinking they are learning English as a foreign language end up using it as a lingua franca. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is defined by the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) “English is used a common means of communication among speakers from different first language backgrounds.” Let me quickly define ELF before looking at some of the differences between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) which is a contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue, nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language.

**Table 3:** Differences between EFL and ELF

<b>EFL</b>	<b>ELF</b>
Foreigners' skills which are needed in an English speaking country or in managerial positions in US-based multinational companies. Holiday and travel.	Communication in global educational, business and other domains. These communicative events can take place without a single native speaker of English from the inner circle countries. (Mauranen, 2006)
Oral communication is the primary goal with a thrust on conversation and small-talk.	Focuses on public speaking with moderate rate of delivery.
Strict adherence to native speaker norms of use.	Use of rhetorical devices, such as redundancy, repetition and paraphrasing.
Imitate native speaker models of pronunciation with fast and fluent speech with inner circle cultural norms.	Slow English in terms of rate of delivery (ETS, 2011). Native speaker cultural references not always relevant.
Grammatical accuracy is the be all and end all of writing	Audience awareness - the effect on the target reader or listener. Clarity of ideas, organisation, consistency and coherence are more important than grammatical correctness. (Britain, 2010)
Teaching is limited to pragmatic functions and social transactions of language.	Cross-cultural competence in two languages considered an asset more than the typical monolingual native speaker of English. (Seidlhofer, 2009)

#### 4. Pedagogic Challenges

The pedagogic challenges in the teaching of English in Thailand stem from some of the differences mentioned in Table 3. Although a change of policy and redefining the role of English in Thailand in relation to other Asean countries may help, changes should transcend beyond superficial levels and lead to concrete realization of an ELF methodology in pedagogic terms through teaching methods, materials/texts, activities and assessment to suit the wider needs of Asean. I will begin with methods of teaching English in the Thai context.

##### 4.1 Methods of Teaching English

Firstly, schools in Thailand can be either government/ public schools and private schools not to mention bilingual and international schools which are outside the scope of this paper. However, as Kirkpatrick (2008) states, most of the private school and language centres tend to sell English as an Anglo-American commodity.

English is taught in the government schools from Primary 1 (Prathom 1), which is meant for learners who are at least 6 years old. Although English is taught from Primary 1, the other subjects are taught in Thai according to the National curriculum. Education in the government schools is meant to be free for all students unlike Private schools where education is not free. The government schools are under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education. Some private schools in big cities have an English-medium section where instruction in other subjects could be in English with foreign teachers. Although the private

schools follow guidelines of the National curriculum they are under the control of Private Education Commission.

English is a compulsory language starting from level 1 in primary education (6 years of age). It is divided into four levels. Level 1 (Preparatory) and Level 2 (Beginners) are in primary school; Level 3 expanding or lower secondary and Level 4 upper-secondary education. There are three objectives in the English courses which are knowledge, skills, and positive attitude towards English. Knowledge involves how to use the English language in real communication, learning and understanding the culture of native speakers, knowing the differences between Thai and the English language, being able to use English to gain information in other subjects, being able to use English for lifelong learning, to find pleasure and to use it in their work. Skills involve communication strategies, thinking skills, critical and creative thinking skills, self-evaluation, learning skills, knowledge seeking skills, technology skills and social skills on how to work with others. A positive attitude includes appreciating the English language and its multiple identities due to the rapid spread across the world. Therefore, it is rather ambitious in trying to place the English language in any particular cultural context which gains its identity depending on the socio-cultural context.

According to Biyaem (1997), teachers and learners face a great deal of challenges. For teachers, the main problems are heavy teaching loads with around 50-60 students per class who have insufficient skills in the English language. It is worth noting that technology and resources in many of the classrooms are far from adequate and teachers are often under pressure to prepare learners to pass tests and examinations at various levels including university entrance tests. Therefore, teaching for the tests is the main goal of English courses rather than fluent communication or interaction leading to real learning and experiencing the language through appreciation which will eventually lead to acquisition.

From the learners' perspective, their inability to speak English fluently forces them to think that it is a difficult language because of several obstacles such as interference from the mother tongue (Thai) particularly in pronunciation, syntax, and idiomatic usage. Regional variation is an integral part of varieties of English in the world; however, learners should be trained to be intelligible within and across the region rather than being concerned about using native varieties of English (Kirkpatrick, 2008). Most of the Thai learners are not likely to use English outside the classroom which is one of the reasons for the lack of proficiency in the language. Moreover, Thai learners are often shy and passive in the classroom partly for fear of losing face or deference towards their teachers.

According to Foley (2005) and Wongsothorn et al. (2003), many schools continue to follow the time honoured tradition of teaching English through grammar and translation of decontextualised sentences which fail to represent authentic or real English as used in the outside world. Reading in English is restricted to artificially contrived expository topics which are often removed from learners' lives with multiple-choice items and literal comprehension questions at the end of passages. Extended or expressive writing is quite rare at the school level and therefore, students at the university level lack control in writing various academic genres for their disciplines.

Listening and speaking skills are often taught in isolation rather than in an integrative way as evinced in the curriculum cycle. According to Shape and Thompson (1998) (cited in

Foley 2012), the curriculum cycle or teaching/learning cycle aims to integrate the four skills of language in addition to addressing language problems and this cycle can be incorporated into Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The first stage of this cycle is meant to prepare the context or the field.

- ◆ “Field Knowledge” or “Field Building” is the first stage. The main idea of this stage is to build control of the field or topic by talking about the topic. A range of activities that could provide opportunities for students to talk about the topic would be included at this step. This includes reading widely on the topic and discussing the lexicogrammatical features depending on the learners’ needs.
- ◆ In the second stage, “modelling,” the explicit focus will be on the genre that the students will be writing. In this stage, models of the genre will be presented to the students to be analysed. This stage exposes students to the fixed genre, which allows them to familiarise with the text type.
- ◆ The third stage is the “joint construction.” Here, the teacher serves as a facilitator in helping the students to construct a model of the genre. The overall knowledge of the field, content and text organization is stressed by the teacher which is likely to help students to practice what they have learned with teacher guidance.
- ◆ Teacher scaffolds in order to encourage learners to apply the knowledge from modelling and teacher input. The main objective of this stage is to reflect and apply their ideas learnt in the earlier stages to produce an acceptable piece of writing (Martin 1992).

It should be noted that speaking is often taught by imposing the rules of writing rather than the rules of speech. Speech is quite different from writing and therefore human speech follows rules of spoken grammar. Listening in the foreign language classroom is restricted to spoken texts drawn from Anglo-American contexts which may pose difficulties for Thai or ASEAN learners due to lack of exposure. On the other hand, it is worth considering exposing learners to local or regional varieties of English before they listen to other varieties of the language which should be promoted through materials based on sound theoretical principles.

#### **4.2 Materials**

Teaching materials tend to promote linguistic competence with a focus on accuracy as opposed to communicative competence where the goal is fluent communication. Textbooks tend to focus on linguistic ‘form’ rather than ‘meaning’. Although focus on form is necessary, it should be limited to raising learners’ awareness as opposed to explicit teaching leading to memorisation of rules which learners may not be able to apply in real communication.

Topics in language teaching materials often deal with issues that are removed from learners’ lives which could affect motivation, resulting in the mismatch between topics/cultural contents and learners’ socio-cultural background. Although authentic materials represent issues and language of the outside world, texts need not represent Anglo-American or European cultural contexts. On the contrary, authentic texts can be found from contexts where English is not the first or even the dominant language when one considers the language from an ELF perspective for people who do not share a common first language.

Although changes in materials appear exciting, teachers have the daunting task of preparing learners for examinations which rely on rules and knowledge of the language.

#### **4.3 Testing**

Examinations and tests are often considered as appropriate ways to measure learning formal settings. Although examinations are important, alternative ways of assessing learners should be considered. For instance, oral presentations, projects, portfolios, creation of art objects and creative writing can be included in assessment, as they tend to be more practical and reflect English as used in the outside world. Broadening the range of assessment which involves a wider range of skills and strategies is likely to give a clearer understanding about learners' capacity, interests and styles. The issues related to methods, materials and tests are not achievable by a handful of specialists, but requires several training sessions for teachers to be equipped in order to meet the challenges successfully.

#### **4.4 Teacher Training**

Many institutions struggle to find appropriately trained local teachers of English whereas some institutions have a very strict policy on appointing native English teachers from inner circle countries or foreign teachers hoping to use English as the only language in the classroom (Kachru, 1985). According to Foley (2012) native speaker models have prestige and credibility and these models have been documented and codified through dictionaries, grammar and usage books. The availability of these resources through codification has enabled these models to gain acceptance as standard varieties of English and has rendered standard ways of testing and assessing language learners. The demand for native speakers in the ELT industry has led many institutions to compromise on professional qualifications. As a result, there is a clear prejudice in the local models of English, which even stifles the growth of nativized varieties of English which can be intelligible within and across other varieties of English. The dominance of native speaker models can affect the morale of local teachers in terms of their abilities in the language, methods of teaching and classroom management.

Foley (2012) makes a case for local teachers who share the learners' first language as they will have the experience of learning English as a second/ foreign language which native speakers will not have. Therefore, the idea of a monolingual teacher should be positively discouraged as long as the local teachers use other languages judiciously in the teaching of English. The ability to use more than one language in the classroom should be viewed as a strength rather than a weakness which will make the local multilingual teacher proud of his or her language abilities. Lastly, local teachers are likely to have a better understanding of the socio-cultural context of their learners and institutions apart from the experience of learning English as a second/foreign language.

According to Kirkpatrick (2008), the need for an internationally intelligible model of English has led to the dominance of the native speaker model at the cost of other varieties of English which are in wide use across people who do not use English as their first language. However, according to Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006), language varies according to socio-cultural needs and the preference for certain models over the others stem from prejudices which lie outside the scope of communication in the context of ELF. Therefore, the variety of English to be taught should be determined by the background of the teachers, learners, the possible contexts and domains in which learners are likely to use English. Although it is useful to recruit foreign teachers, one should ensure that they have a background in language

teaching or English studies more than being native speakers of English. It is appropriate to use terms such as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or Successful Users of English (SUE) instead of native and non-native speakers of English in ELT.

## 5. Conclusion

I have tried to highlight the major cultural and pedagogic issues in the ELT context of Thailand that should be addressed in terms of AEC 2015. The issues and problems are quite substantial in terms of teaching methods, materials and tests and evaluation which require rethinking the role of English from a foreign language to a lingua franca. The changes should take place at several levels of the system rather than a few cosmetic and superficial changes to the existing scenario. Although it is hard to reshape cultural values, a forum should be created for teachers to come forward to voice their ideas and opinions without being limited by hierarchy. This should be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat by decision makers. Teachers should be given adequate training to become confident users of language and trained to become critical about their professionalism, materials and resources who in turn may come forward to help other teachers in their contexts. The list is not exhaustive but worth considering for Thailand to retain its competitive advantage in ASEAN and the rest of the world.

## 6. The Author

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