The Problems of Teaching English in Thailand at the School Level

Patama Sompong

General Background

Thailand's Educational Systems:

Thailand's present systems of education is comparatively new, dating only from the last part of the 19th century. Before that, Buddhist temples played an important role as the educational centre for many hundreds of years. Only the male members of the society had the right to be educated. The first modern school was established on the palace ground in 1871 for the royal families, its primary purpose was to train boys for office work or civil service.

In 1887, the Department of Education was established, 5 years later it became the Ministry of Education, responsible for educational administration as well as cultural and religious affairs of the country. The first National Education Plan announced in 1898 was adapted from the British system.

Up to present (1981), there have been 5 major National Schemes of Education approved, the latest in 1977, which the new school structure of 6-3-3 began, with the first 6 years as compulsory education (Chart I).

The School-age and Out-of-school Population:

The present number of Thailand’s population is of 47 millions (1979), with the percentage of illiteracy of 14.3. According to Chart II, the school-age population (ages 4-24) is 24,227,116, but the actual number of the students is only 9,549,930 (39.42%) which means that 60.58% of the school-age population are out of schools. The biggest group of the students (75.85%) is at the elementary level which is compulsory, then it drops sharply to 13.55% and 5.35% at the lower secondary level and the higher secondary one. An for the university level, there is only 1.91% out of the whole number of the school-age population.

The Teaching of English

General View:

The foreign languages studied in Thailand in those days were Pali and Sanskrit which came together with Buddhism about 800 years ago. English became more important at the time when Great Britain began her colonialism in South East Asia in the late 18th century. At first, it was taught in the palace to the princes and some of the princesses, and then, when the first western-style was established in 1871, it became one of the compulsory subjects.

Nowadays, there are 4 foreign languages taught at the lower secondary level, they are: English, French, Japanese and Arabic. The students are to choose only one out of the four. Nearly all of them choose English which means that the number of the students studying English at least 4 periods a week is about 1.3 millions at the lower secondary level and 500,000 at the higher one (Chart II).
The Problems Concerning English Teaching:

The problems concerning the teaching of English in Thailand are so enormous and deep rooted that it is impossible for any individual to solve. They may be roughly divided according to their origins into three big topics:

I. The Teachers of English in Thailand

1.1 Most of the English teachers are not specially trained to be the language teachers, they have to teach other subjects as well.

1.2 The ordinary teaching load is about 20 to 25 periods — or in some remote areas, 35 periods, so the teachers themselves are overworked and too busy to prepare their lessons.

1.3 Even if they teach English, some English teachers cannot pronounce some English sounds properly. They cannot converse in English fluently — if at all. Less than 10% have had the chance to go abroad or become accustomed to hearing native speakers.

1.4 In Thailand, people with a good command of English are still wanted by nearly all authorities; and as the Thai government officials receive a very low salary compared to employees of private companies. Therefore most of the schools have to face the problems of a shortage of well qualified English teachers. Moreover, because of frequent changes in staff, English teaching becomes worse and worse.

II. Methodology

2.1 The main objective in teaching English in Thailand is to teach the written language, so that the students can be able to read English texts at the higher (university) level. Therefore, most of the Thai university graduates can read and write in English, but their listening and speaking skills are not so good.

2.2 As a developing country, the school budget is so limited that throughout the country there are only about 10 schools at the pre-university level with a language laboratory. So it is rather hard for the teachers to teach the students to pronounce English words properly. Nearly all the teaching is done in the classroom.

2.3 The number of the students in each class is also another problem for effective teaching. The ordinary class size is about 45 to 55 students, so it is impossible to adopt the individual approach.

III. The Students

3.1 Unwillingness to learn — they just learn because they have to; most of them do not understand the importance of learning English. Their reasons for learning this subject are:

- English is one of the compulsory courses at the secondary school level.
- English is one of the four (or five) subjects in the university entrance examination.

Moreover, the English courses' credits are less than those of science and mathematics, so most of the students throw themselves into those 2 subjects. The other reason is that they just feel that they do not have a chance to use English in everyday life.

3.2 Lack of self-confidence — especially in speaking. Since there is no language laboratory in school, the students find it so hard to pronounce English words correctly, they scarcely have a chance to listen to native speakers. When this is added to the fact that Thai children are always too shy to show themselves off, it is a very hard burden for any English teacher to push them to speak.
CHART I
Structure of Educational System B.E. 2520 (1977)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preprimary Education</th>
<th>Primary Education</th>
<th>Secondary Education</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1-2-3-4-5-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preprimary Education</td>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preprimary Education</td>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1-2-3-4-5-6</td>
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Approximate Age

CHART II
Thailand's Educational Statistics 1979

<table>
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<tr>
<th>level</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>S. P.</th>
<th>S. A. P.</th>
<th>S. P. / S. A. P.</th>
<th>S. P. / whole S. P.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kindergarten</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>318,128</td>
<td>4,016,718</td>
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<td>elementary</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>7,243,764</td>
<td>7,493,576</td>
<td>96.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>lower secondary</td>
<td>13-16</td>
<td>1,294,084</td>
<td>4,474,343</td>
<td>28.92</td>
<td>13.55</td>
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<tr>
<td>higher secondary</td>
<td>17-19</td>
<td>511,624</td>
<td>2,978,554</td>
<td>17.18</td>
<td>5.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>university</td>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>181,930</td>
<td>5,263,905</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td></td>
<td>9,549,530</td>
<td>24,227,116</td>
<td>39.42</td>
<td>100.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: S. P. School population
S. A. P. School-age population