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ENRICHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPOKEN OUTPUTS OF KINDERGARTNERS IN THAILAND

Summary: This year is designated as Thailand’s “English Speaking Year” with the aim of improving the communicative competence of Thais for the upcoming integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2015. The consistent low-level proficiency of the Thais in the English language has led to numerous curriculum revisions and developmental policies on the national level. Since the implementation of educational reforms in the country in 1998, there has still been little research on its impact in the classroom, specifically the kindergarten level. The review conducted on the contemporary national education curriculum for kindergarten education did not specifically mention benchmarks for the children’s English language performance. However, the curriculum explicitly detailed thirty-six integrated lessons for an academic year. Thus, in the absence of specific learning standards for English language learning at the kindergarten level, this paper provides snapshots of children’s spoken outputs and lessons to enrich kindergartners’ English language proficiency in Thailand.

Keywords: education, English as a lingua franca, language teaching, kindergartners, Thailand.

1. INTRODUCTION

English First's (EF, 2012) English Proficiency Survey showed very low English proficiency of Thailand among 44 countries surveyed, third to Turkey and Kazakhstan at the bottom level. This is a dismal performance given that the country invested heavily on education in addition to educational reforms since 1998.

Adding to the pressure for Thais to become proficient in English language is the prevalent usage of English as a lingua franca among Aseans (Jenkins, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Wilang and Teo, 2012a). It is envisioned that Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam will become a single community in 2015.

This paper has three main aims: (1) to review the educational reforms instituted in Thailand a year after the 1997 economic crisis as well as the country's kindergarten education and curriculum; (2) to describe in detail the Thai kindergarten educational system and the level 3 national curriculum; and, (3) to provide practical proposals on how to enrich Thai children's spoken outputs in line with the aim to drastically improve Thai's English language proficiency.

2. THAILAND'S BASIC EDUCATION REFORMS

The 1997 financial crisis that crippled Southeast Asian economies, which originated in Thailand, led Thai bureaucrats to initiate sweeping reforms across the country. The educational reform in 1998 envisioned citizens as possessing the qualities to cope with the demands of an ever changing society. With the upcoming ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, it is not yet certain how educational reforms in 1998 and onwards

have affected the competitiveness and readiness of Thai people.

Despite the plausibility of the reforms on paper, setbacks arise in school, especially in the classroom. Ampa and Thantee's (1998) recommendations pose huge challenges in changing the learning and teaching behavior of the students and teachers. Included in the list of curriculum guidelines on which teachers must focus are (1) integration of content to daily life application; (2) the cultivation of more real-life activities rather than textbook-based activities; (3) the adaptation of learning materials; and (4) the promotion of student-centered classrooms as well as student-led discussions. In spite of the directives given, the teacher-centered approach is still dominant, with preference of dictation, concentration on textbook usage, and the use of few teaching materials. Also, there are an insufficient number of external supervisors and a mismatch between their recommendations and the realities in the classroom as well as the community needs. Moreover, there exists a prevalent negative attitude towards internal classroom supervision in the Thai educational community.

Despite the mounting challenges, the Basic Education Core Curriculum was initiated in 2008 and is currently in use. The recent curriculum focuses on students' emotional, physical, social and mental capabilities. It is hoped that each Thai citizen will become a law abiding individual, physically healthy, capable of critical thinking, knowledgeable, and highly moral. To achieve such elusive goals, teaching and learning approaches must effectively adopt child/student-centered principles. While such an idea is applicable to all disciplines covered in the broader curriculum, a closer look at the aims of foreign language teaching and learning is necessary. The Basic Education Curriculum 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2008: 252) states that its aims are to "enable learners to be aware of diversity of cultures and viewpoints in the world community, conducive to friendship and cooperation with various countries" and "use foreign

languages for communication as well as for easier and wider access to bodies of knowledge”. In addition, the concept of language for communication includes the “use of foreign languages for listening, speaking, reading and writing, exchanging data and information, expressing feelings and opinions, interpreting, presenting data, concepts and views on various matters, and creating interpersonal relationships appropriately.” Such goals may help attain this year’s project, “English Speaking Development in the Year 2012” initiated by the Ministry of Education.

With the broad overview presented on the development of basic education in Thailand, we now look at the lowest level of the Thai educational system as well the kindergarten 3 curriculum.

3. KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION IN THAILAND

Kindergarten education or early year education in Thailand offers different programs such as normal, bilingual and international. Normal programs utilize the first language (Thai) as a medium of instruction in the classroom whereas bilingual programs use Thai and a foreign language (usually English if not Chinese, French, etc.) and equal time in teaching is given to core subjects such as Math, Science, among others. International curricula employ English as a sole language of instruction except for the Thai language course.

Kindergarten education normally starts at the age of two depending on each school’s admission policies. There are three main stages, excluding nursery, kindergarten one (commonly referred as K1), kindergarten two (K2), and kindergarten 3 (K3). By the time the kids are aged six they start their primary education, which later continues on the secondary and higher education levels successively.

Teaching and learning reforms embodied in the National Education

Act of 1999 encourage the use of the mother tongue at the kindergarten level. Also, efforts have been put into the integration of local wisdom and culture in the curriculum. In other provisions, the 1999 Act envisioned the transformation of language teaching and learning experiences by using “authentic materials and learning situations”. To realize such aims new standards of professional competence have been initiated. Teachers are obliged to improve and transform their subject knowledge, methods of teaching practices, and classroom management, as well as to seek professional development.

The 10-Year Plan and Policy for Early Childhood Development 2006–2015 (UNESCO, 2011) provided a blueprint for achieving universal early childhood education for all Thai children. There are three main strategies prioritized: (1) to support early childhood development, (2) to support parents and other stakeholders, and (3) to promote an environment that facilitates early childhood development.

The school year is divided into two semesters. The first semester starts in late May and ends in early October while the second semester starts in early November and ends in late March. In the kindergarten, the curriculum broadly encourages children to practice fundamental skills in four areas of learning; namely, physical, emotional, social, and mental. There is a lot of emphasis on social values with respect to “*wai*” (greeting), “*sawasdee*” (hi/hello/good morning/good afternoon/good evening/good bye), “*khor tod*” (sorry), “*khob khun*” (Thank you), the use of politeness particles “*kha*” for females and “*khrap*” for males. Moreover, other activities include painting, drawing, singing, dancing, writing Thai alphabets, among others.

In another document, the Ministry of Education’s 10th National Economic and Social Development Plan, the focus was placed on “morally-based knowledge and resilience against the adverse effects of

globalization” like the adoption of Moral Education through the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy.

The national curriculum for kindergarten 3 entitled “World-Class Standard Kindergarten, Under the Sufficiency Economy Principles Project” listed thirty-six integrated lessons for an academic year. Subjects taught are Arts, English, Physical Education, Math, Science, Social Studies, Thai, among others. The units are: *we come to school, when I grow up, my emotion, what’s in my body?, sense organs, good food, good health, I have a good manner, morality, my family, my house, my school, my community, occupations, tour around Thailand, my province, I love Thailand, foreign countries, living things, world animals, knowing plants, non-livings, natural environment, environmental conservation, days and dates, Seasons, let’s love the world, colors and their symbols, figures and shapes, weighing and measuring, tools and equipment, labor saving device, fun trip, contact and communication, space and technology.*

It is expected that students will be able to read, write and know the English alphabet, initial sounds, final sounds, clusters, and vocabulary concerned with each topic or title. A sample reading exercise in Unit 4 is given below. Here students are required to read aloud.

A: What’s in my body?

B: Inside my body it is so interesting.

A: There are many things in here.

B: My brain is for thinking.

A: My heart is giving love.

B: Without my lungs I can’t breathe.

A: How can I live without them?

There is a wide gap between the national curriculum’s expectations and the realities in the classroom. There remain ambiguous English language benchmarks required for level 3 kindergartners. By comparing

the sample reading activity above against the age of the children and the density of the lessons provided against the timetable in each semester, great concerns remain.

Thus, in the following section, this paper provides examples on how the English language maybe cultivated in a bid to improve Thai children's command of spoken English (Mahachai, 2011) by detailing sample utterances, and how to enrich children's spoken language via oral activities.

4. ENRICHING SPOKEN OUTPUTS OF KINDERGARTNERS IN THAILAND

Having shown the importance of the English language to kindergartners, we will now look at the Thai language which likely influences the learners' spoken output. Based on the data received from classroom observations, it is not surprising to hear Thai kids repeatedly say "*cat big*" or "*car yellow*" after much implicit or explicit teaching. What constitutes such mistakes and how do teachers help very young kids avoid making persistent spoken grammatical errors?

Trying to explain the Thai language structure, Gajaseni (2011) made the following observations: verbs are not conjugated, articles are not used, there are no grammatical inflections of any kind, and there is no subject-verb agreement. Jenkins's (2003) extensive research on ELF also provided pronunciation features that may cause difficulties in the comprehension of spoken output. A few illustrations of the observations above are provided in the examples below.

Example 1: Who am I?

T: What's your name?

S1: *Nong Bua kha.*

S2: *Pi Tem khap.*

S3: My name it /ɪz/ Sakai /Skɑɪ/.

S4: I Mew *khap.*

The use of the addressing term ‘*nong*’ to address a younger person and ‘*pi*’ to denote an older person is an acceptable utterance. In addition, adding politeness particles such as girls’ ‘*kha*’ or ‘boys’ ‘*khap*’ at the end of an utterance are several features of Thai culture that must not be construed as being *wrong*. Teachers must not put much weight on S1 and S2’s utterances but spend more time on S3’s pronunciation, getting the child to repetitively pronounce the final and the initial /s/, perhaps through the presentation of a pair of words which differ only in the absence or presence of these sounds, as in *it* vs. *it’s* or *top* vs. *stop*. As for S4, more spoken examples may be presented including *am* to make the utterance grammatical.

Example 2: colors + toys

S1: It /ɪts/ a bon /bɔl/ blue.

S2: It / its / a doll led /red/.

The above example is a from a lesson integrating the topics of *colors* and *toys*. Again, teachers need to make sure that a descriptive word or a modifier comes before the noun. As it is difficult for children to absorb grammatical rules and remember the structure being presented, the repetition of such activities must be encouraged. Lesson revisions must integrate sentence structures previously taught.

Example 3: numbers + shapes

S1: two satar /stɑ:r/

S2: triangle ten

S3: a sik /sɪks/ diamond.

For S1’s utterance, the plural marker *s* is missing in addition to the pronunciation problem. S2’s utterance can be corrected by asking Ss to place the number before the countable noun. Again, students must be

asked to add the /s/ ending to denote the plural form. There is also an instance where kids may overgeneralize rules such as the use of article *a* in S3's utterance.

Example 4: My family

S1: She is my fader /'fɑ:ðər /

S2: He is my moder /'mʌðər/

There is an obvious mistake and confusion in the usage of pronouns *she* and *he* from S1 and S2's utterances. In Thailand, the word *khun*, referring to a person, does not denote gender difference between a man and a woman unlike *mister* or *miss* in English.

Example 5: My breakfast

S1: I like lice /raɪs/.

S2: She like egg.

The inability to pronounce /r/ correctly is a common problem among Thais. S1's substitution of /l/ for /r/ in words such as *rice* is a typical error a Thai student makes. As for S2's utterance, where there is no subject-verb agreement, it remains a challenging task for the teacher to teach the –s inflection at the end of the present-tense verb. When kids take notice of the –s ending of the verb, another challenge yet arises when teachers start presenting the simple present verb form with a singular subject which is not a third person. For instance, instead of *I wait*, kids may say *I waits*. And in the case of an irregular past tense, children may produce *I goed* instead of *I went*. This seems to be a persistent case of rule overgeneralization.

Other pronunciation problems apparently occur in words with /v/, usually pronounced as /f/; and words with /z/, usually pronounced as /s/ or voiceless; intonation problems (yes-no questions and wh-questions); and stress problems.

The linguistic differences between the Thai and English language structures need a careful and serious consideration by the language teacher

in the classroom. And as it is impossible to have kids produce written and read texts, in the continuation of the section, we offer detailed oral activities that promote the learners' mastery of the production of well-formed spoken language.

- Alphabets – Kindergarteners at their age should learn and recognize the upper case and lower case letters of the alphabets. At level three, they begin writing their names. Thus, teachers can explain that when writing their names, it is always a rule that the first letter must be upper case. For levels lower than three, children can start tracing capital letters or lower case letters. The recognition of alphabets should be accompanied by teaching the corresponding phonetic sound of each letter. This will greatly help children to sharpen their reading and writing skills in the future.
- Vocabulary – As it impossible for kids to know the parts of speech, teachers can teach vocabulary by grouping words accordingly. For example, teachers can teach things at school in one lesson while action words or emotions will be tackled in another week. At the end of the unit, the teachers can ask children to group the words together accordingly.
- Singular and plural forms of nouns – Teachers can use big flashcards with things or animals on them. They can compare two flashcards of dogs, one flashcard having one dog and the other having two or more dogs. In the process they can emphasize the /s/ so that children can differentiate which picture card should have the plural form. The activity can be extened by using numbers. Thai children are able to say *eight cars* or *one banana* when clear instructions and more practices are given.
- Commands – The simplest lessons that can be taught to children are the recognition that a particular word is an *action* word or a

“verb”. By saying *run, jump, walk*, etc. kids are able to respond to the words by performing the correct action associated with them. Teachers can extend the activity by using personal/third personal pronouns + (modal) verb + verb such as *I can swim, I can't dance*, among others.

- Adjectives – In relation to exercises that practise putting numbers before nouns, which generally conforms to the rule that an adjective comes before the noun, teachers can extend activities by sequencing adjectives such as size, age, and colors + nouns. For example, by arranging picture cards based on the above order, children are able to say *a big old black elephant*.
- Sentence structure – The most effective way of teaching sentence structure to Thai kids is the use of visual aids. For example, in a simple sentence where the adjective (colors) comes first before the noun (animals), teachers should place the color card before the animal card. Children are able to perfectly say “*orange cat*”, “*black cow*”, “*white sheep*” and so on. Teachers have the option of incorporating the use of *a* or *an* and then extending it to a longer sentence, in which the output is most likely to be *It is an orange cat* and so on. Adjectives commonly taught to kindergartners, aside from colors, are sizes and numbers.
- Sequencing – As understanding word sequencing is part of grammar learning, children must be exposed to a myriad of sequencing activities, for example, reading simple stories, then presenting pictures that represents the actions observed. The chronology of the events is also a plausible option to undertake in the classroom. Teachers may also ask the children to retell the story in their first language or act out the story whichever the students prefer to do.

5. CONCLUSION

The acquisition of spoken English starts from a very young age in the kindergarten school. With the progressive educational reforms initiated in Thailand since 1998, Thailand needs to do a realignment of national educational goals for kindergarten education. There remains a wide gap on the national expectations and the realities in the classroom. While this paper did not intensively evaluate the curriculum to point out the extent of the mismatch observed in the classroom, the above scan of the national kindergarten 3 curriculum alone indicates this mismatch. To support this year's English Speaking project, albeit steering away from the national curriculum, this paper detailed English language practical lessons that can aid the children's English language spoken proficiency.

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Цефри Давала Виланг и Кемтонг Синвонгсуват

ОБОГАЋИВАЊЕ ГОВОРНЕ ПРОДУКЦИЈЕ У НАСТАВИ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА НА РАНОМ УЗРАСТУ У ТАЈЛАНДУ

Ова година је у Тајланду одређена за „Годину енглеског језика“ и циљ јој је побољшање комуникативне компетенције Тајланђана због интеграције у Удружење јужноазијских нација 2015. године. Низак ниво знања енглеског језика код Тајланђана био је разлог многих ревизија планова и програма, као и промена у развојној политици на националном нивоу. Од спровођења образовних реформи 1998. године до данас било је мало истраживања о утицају тих реформи на наставу, нарочито на раном узрасту. У недостатку одређених образовних стандарда за наставу енглеског језика на раном узрасту, овај рад анализира говорну продукцију деце и наставне јединице које би помогле обogaћивању и повећању нивоа енглеског језика на раном узрасту у Тајланду.

Кључне речи: образовање, енглески као лингва франка, настава језика, рани узраст, Тајланд.