

Why Learn English?

Thai teachers' views on the importance of English

A couple of years ago at one bilingual school in Bangkok, as part of a follow-up to a broad survey of senior students' and teacher' perspectives on English-medium classes, Thai teachers were asked to rank in order of importance ten different reasons for studying English at school.

Results of the survey had shown that students had rated speaking ability higher than reading and writing ability. However, their Thai teachers had given priority to reading and writing. In order to clarify why these perspectives differed, Thai staff were given the ranking task. (Students had already left school by this time, so could not be asked.)

The results showed a strong preference for the view that study of English is of *primary importance for improving students' academic opportunities and choices*. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the highest and 10 the lowest priority) the two *highest* priority reasons Thai teachers gave were as follows:

- In order to be able to study overseas (1.92)
- To get good marks for entrance to university (2.23)

The *lowest* priority reasons selected by Thai teachers were

- To get more value from the internet (6.46)
- To enjoy Western culture and entertainment (8.30)

It would be interesting to know if these priorities reflect those of parents, employers, universities, senior civil servants and politicians. Clearly, teachers are concerned with their students' chances of success in the present and subsequent stages of their education. Parents probably share this concern and one would expect senior secondary students to be thinking seriously about their options on completing school. Hence, teachers and some students may think that strong ability in reading and writing tasks is most important for further academic success in English.

However, whether any communicative task takes spoken or written form, both forms complement each other. Very young children and 'folk bilinguals' (people who use a language for a limited purpose, such as to sell goods and

services in the market or on the street) do not depend on knowledge of the written form, but students and people using a language for significant communication would be hampered by lack of competence in either form. Ability in one enhances ability in the other. Hence, in bilingual (Thai-English) education, emphasis is given to the spoken form, but without neglect of the written form, especially as students get older, and both forms are enhanced by the development of English through content in the different curriculum areas. Most reading and writing proceeds from an ability to produce and understand meaningful oral language. It is certainly very difficult to write with any degree of elegance if one has no feeling for the rhythm of the spoken language, and that can only be acquired through exposure and practice.

Languages on the Net

With regard to the use of different languages on the world wide web, it is interesting to note that in 2004 there were 7 million people in Thailand accessing the internet and other online facilities. Of this 7 million, 4.9 million were doing so in Thai. This means that 2.1 million internet users in Thailand were using a language other than Thai

for connection with the world wide web. In other words, 30% of internet usage in Thailand is by means of a non-Thai language. One would assume (but without the data) that most of this 30% is in English. Clearly, for a high proportion of Thailand-located web users, English is the most convenient language. You might like to look at <http://global-reach.biz/globstats/refs.php3#26> for more detail about languages on the net. Incidentally, 68.4% of web content is in English. The next most represented languages are Japanese with 5.9% and German with 5.8%.

English in Decline?

The internet data would suggest that English is unassailable as the language of international communication, something with which this writer would agree. However, my attention was drawn recently to an article on the National Geographic website: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/02/0226_040226_language.html advising that the status of English may be about to peak and then decline.

Reading beyond the headlines, however, it is clear that this decline is only relative, in terms of the total native-speaker

population (340 million) and its proportion of the world's population. Whereas 9% of the world spoke English as their mother tongue 50 years ago, the figure is now only about 5%. Mandarin Chinese is well established as the world's largest language in terms of native speakers. However, the number of speakers of Mandarin as a second language (200 million) is only 40% that of English as a second language (515 million) and 90% of Mandarin second language speakers are in China. It's also worth noting that, in China, about 250 million people are learning English. By comparison, there are only 20 million students of Mandarin as a second language throughout the entire world, of which 75% are in Asia. The world is becoming increasingly bilingual, and easily the most popular and influential second language is and will most likely continue to be English.

Speaking of influence, another study reported on the same website, has found that the position of English as the language of Science is strengthening. At present, 90% of journal literature in some scientific fields is in English and there is no sign of the influence of English diminishing in the scientific world.

Indeed, though its native-speaker population may be in relative decline, this fact needs to be balanced by the growth in numbers of second language speakers of English whose ability is at or close to native speaker levels. More and more second language speakers throughout the world now have high levels of competence in English. These people will pass on their enthusiasm for the language to their children and this phenomenon is not going to decline.