

Thailand's English Future (Part One)

Students leaving school this summer were born in 1988-89. They were born into a world – especially if they were city kids – in which video recorders and simple video games were popular; audio CDs were quite recent; some people were beginning to use personal computers (but without internet) and hardly anyone had a mobile phone. Television was in every home, however, and business and professional people were traveling more and beginning to see the full significance of English as the language of international communication.

Urban students who will be entering Year One (P1) in May this year were born in 2000-2001. The world they were born into was connected to the internet; video games had been superseded by highly sophisticated computer games; VCDs and DVDs were replacing videotapes; one could talk to people in real time over the net; mobile phones were becoming common, and business people were increasingly using their mobiles to make overseas calls in English.

The world of communication technology has developed in leaps and bounds since our school-leavers were born. People no longer write letters to each other. Email has taken over that function; and young people do not just phone each other. Chat rooms allow digital conversation with many more partners. And with the emergence of email, writing has become a significant form of communication once again – but not just writing as we knew it. Young people have developed a new code to suit the medium – one with abbreviations, acronyms and spellings that mystify their elders.

Of course, the internet is still largely an English-language medium, though chat rooms and forums in Thai are increasingly available. Thai language programs and services will continue to be developed and will cater for Thai people's needs within the warm, but relatively restricted circle of Thai society. If people in Thailand wish to communicate with the world outside their borders, however, English is likely to be the language they will have to use. Thai people have to learn English, therefore, and to quite a good standard, if they are going to benefit from globalization. A sufficiency economy may mean less

dependence on the outside world, but not less interaction – nor, probably, less trade.

In the past there have been many Thai people who have succeeded in higher education in the West and brought back with them skills and ideas that they have been able to use here. Most of them, however, were the sons and daughters of aristocratic and wealthy commercial families. A couple of things have changed since those days.

First, there is now a need for a much wider distribution of English ability in the population as more people are required to speak and understand spoken and written English. Writing skills now are important for people who need to use email with customers and colleagues who are not Thai speakers, both here and abroad. Foreigners here and abroad are less inclined to use the telephone if email is available.

Of course, it would be nice if foreigners all learned to speak Thai, but for people other than long-term expatriates in Thailand, that is unlikely. Furthermore, it is said that “you sell in the buyer’s language; you buy in your own”. Unless

you have a monopoly of a scarce product, being able to speak the buyer’s language will give you an advantage over a competitor who can’t.

Second, to meet the need for a larger number of English speakers to be available, bilingual education has become much more widely available, providing an effective model of content-based instruction in both Thai and English as well as specific study of those two languages. This model (with some variations) has extended the range of competent English speakers significantly (an estimated minimum 300,000 students currently receive bilingual education) at a cost that is within reach of many families that could not afford international schooling or overseas education for their children.

In summary, (1) more people need to know English in order to negotiate the increasingly communicative and interdependent world we live in, and (2) the level of English required is higher than what is needed for a simple conversation, description or explanation. English is not only just a vehicle for communication around the world, it is also being used more competently. Singaporeans below

the age of 40 are now effectively bilingual in their mother tongue and English. Many people in Malaysia, Hong Kong and, of course, the Philippines speak very good English. China is catching up as the result of a strong teacher development program. As a result, Thailand has to put much greater effort and many more resources into building stronger English competence at least among those graduating from higher education, and the place to start for most is at school.

And how should it be done at school? Well, we know that for the vast majority of students the traditional English class, whether taught by a native- or non-native speaker, has achieved very limited success. We know that language, to be learned effectively, has to be learned in a context and for a purpose. Thai children live in Thai speaking environments. They don't get much chance to use English in a context and for a purpose outside school. Hence this must be provided by the school. In bilingual education it is done by teaching students subjects like Maths, Science and Social Studies in English (and, preferably, in Thai also). The context is the subject matter – the purpose is to learn the subject (and pass the exam).

In the next article I shall talk about some things we have learned from the experience of bilingual education in Thailand. From these learnings, a strategy becomes clear for English language development in this country. After all, we can't just focus on catching up with the English of other nations at their current level. They are moving ahead, too, and if their progress is more rapid than ours, we will be even more disadvantaged.