

SURVEY THE LANDSCAPE OF ELT IN THAILAND: OFFERING NEW POSSIBILITY FOR CHANGE

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Abstract

The focus of this conference paper is to raise the issue of empowering local English teachers by bringing back their control over the classroom, having trust in their teaching competence, and helping them to become experts in their profession. The local teachers have been experienced with a limited opportunity to take a full charge of their own teaching. They are coached to follow prototypical methods developed from Anglo-American cultural perspectives. These method packages are commercialized as the 'best' way to teach English, not only in Thailand, but also elsewhere around the world. In this climate, the teachers are reluctant to develop their own methodical approaches, design their own curriculum, and make instructional judgment according to their prior experiences. Such 'best' teaching method packages discourage their potential and opportunity to become intellectuals who are autonomous and critical about their everyday teaching practice. In this paper, I discuss the marginalization and deprofessionalization among Thai teachers of English as can be viewed through the landscape of English language teaching in the country. I present the argument by pointing out problems with prototypical methods, TESOL education, and TESOL Teacher Education Standards, which are heavily influenced from Anglo-American educational perspectives

Keywords: Deprofessionalization, Marginalization, Prototypical Methods, TESOL, Thailand

Introduction

Local Thai teachers of English are challenged to produce Thai graduates with not only communicative ability but also critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. In other words, students have to know how to apply classroom knowledge to the outside world in practical and effective ways. To achieve this goal, the students cannot only learn by rigid instruction. They need to have control over their learning. Teachers need to liberate students, empower their voices and identities, and enhance their personal and critical development. However this seems to be out of reach, since the Thai teachers themselves have been offered a limited chance to choose their

own methodical approaches, design their own curriculum, and make any instructional judgment either. The Thai Teachers of English, “the non-native Other as Inferior,” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) are confined, viewed and constructed in traditional ‘spoon-feeding’, banking ‘empty-vessel filling’ (Freeman and Johnson, 1998), and restrictive ‘correct and best teaching’ (Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999) protocols conceptualized and exercised by Anglo-American theorists who are often considered, “the native Self as Superior” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003)

In order to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students in the English classroom, the role and position of teachers themselves needs to be reconceptualized, changed, and oriented against the *status quo*. The focus of this paper is to raise the issue of empowering and liberating teachers by bringing back their control over the classroom, having trust in their teaching competence, and helping them to become experts in their profession. In this paper, I discuss the marginalization and deprofessionalization among Thai teachers of English as can be viewed through the landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT henceforth) in the country. I present the argument by pointing out problems with prototypical methods, ELT education, and ELT Teacher Education Standards.

Marginalization and deprofessionalization in the landscape of ELT

The Emergence of English Language Teaching in Thailand

The process of marginalization of English education is conjunction with the introduction of English to the country by British Colonial Empire and later the presence of American Empire in the southeast region. Together with the rising power of the British Colonial Empire in Southeast Asia, English was undisputedly introduced to the country and had an impact on Thai people with or without realizing it. During 18th century, many port towns – Penang, Singapore, and Malacca – served as trading hubs of the British East Indian Company. The status of English in the region drastically changed and became “the language of power in the British territories of South-east Asia” (Crystal, 2003, p. 56). The growing number of westerners marched into Thailand with the purpose of trading, religion, and colonialism, and they created a demand for English in Thai higher court officials and administrations. Sukamolson (1998) claims that English at that time was seen through the eyes of Thai people as the language for safety and prosperity.

The presence of Western-led teaching methods was first noticed in the reign of King Rama III (1824-1851) when formal English Language, or ELT as it known today, started taking shape (Baker, 2008; Durongphan, Aksornkul, Sawangwong, & Tiancharoen, 1982; Foley, 2005). Debyasuvarn states that (1981) the very first Thai who was able to communicate both in spoken and written English was King Rama IV (1851-

1868). She further claims that the King also encouraged his wives and children in his court to start learning English and be educated about the world beyond the kingdom. English lessons were arranged for them, and the King hired a number of Christian missionaries, and other British and American tutors to instruct the class.

The first National Compulsory Education Act was issued in 1921, and the English language was assigned as a required subject for all Thai students beyond Fourth Grade in all government secondary schools (Durongphan, et al., 1982). Since then, the English teaching approach in school was based on rote-memorization and grammar translation (Debyasuwan as cited in Wongsothorn, 2000) which has developed from the religious instruction and education in the country. As seen by the educational policy makers at that time, Thai students learned English in order to become a modern thinker for the country and to acquire sufficient knowledge of English to function in academic settings (Aksornkul, 1980).

The language teaching and learning situation remained unchanged until 1960 when the national curriculum placed a greater emphasis on English for international communication – beyond academic purposes. At the time, Foley (2005) claim that the language instruction in class was obviously changed due to the presence and involvement of the United States in Indochina War. The America brought in not only troops but also a new army-based teaching approach, called The Audio-Lingual Method, which was widely adopted and served as the principal approach to foreign language teaching in the US. This method was heavily promoted in Thailand as the most appropriate and effective method to teach English, a required foreign language in Thai schools. The local Thai teachers were discouraged to teach the language through the rote-learning tradition and grammar translation, and they were expected to apply the Audio-Lingual Method in English classrooms. However, Foley (2005) comments that this approach did not succeed very well as it ran counter to the rote memorization method long ingrained in education traditions of Thai culture.

Along with the new national curriculum practice introduced in 1977 and 1980, undergraduate students in a university were required to take six foreign language credits as part of a general education program. English was, of course, the preferred first foreign language among Thai students (Wongsothorn, 2000). At the same time, a new teaching approach originated in Britain called “Communicative Language Teaching” or CLT was promoted in Thailand (Foley, 2005). This method had already been popularized in ELT circle of professionals worldwide (Leung, 2005) as the ‘best’ and ‘correct’ way to help students become competent in English. Without any doubt, Thai teachers of English across the nation were fully expected to apply this approach in their instruction. Around this period, the British Council, an ELT agency from the British government, was engaged in providing a

number of in-service training courses to assist the teaching and learning of English in the country's educational system (Foley, 2005). Bhatt (2001) terms British Council as an "agenc[y] of linguistic coercion" (p. 532) attempting to promote and impose British language and culture norms through their assistance and teaching methods. Hence, CLT has received a very serious critique as it is heavily biased toward Anglo-American communicative styles and cultures (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Leung, 2005; Phan, 2008b). This method has its goal to promote a communicative ability appropriate for "the specific purpose culturally empathizing if not culturally assimilating, with native speakers of English" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 543). By applying CLT into local classrooms, it is likely that the teachers' and students' voices and identities are overshadowed by those of native speakers and ignored in the learning process.

In this connection, Nunan (2003) claims that there is an inequality of gaining access to effective English language instruction between students living urban and rural areas. This implies that CLT tends to be more successful for urban area students who gain more access to effective language instruction and more exposure to western learning culture. However, the situation is different in less developed areas where local foreign language teachers with high language competences and foreign language teaching are not available or easily recruited.

If taking a critical examination of the local ELT history, one finds evidence that these shifts in the teaching and learning English are influenced by the global players – Britain and America. In contrast, the local teachers play a passive role as disempowered their instructional judgments are disempowered and their teaching experience are disvalued. That is, these local teachers of English have always been expected to follow a particular set of theoretical principles and classroom techniques. These methods are developed by Anglo-American theorists, not the local practitioners; however, they are surprisingly considered to be most *appropriate* teaching methods for the local contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). In fact, it is very problematic to assume that there is such kind of *correct and best* English teaching method (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006).

In the next section, I will pinpoint the problems of such prototypical methods that have been embedded in classroom since the early stage of ELT emergence.

ELT Methods as a Means of Marginalization

The marginalization of Thai teachers of English can be viewed through the history of English Language Teaching as presented above. The local teachers have long been expected to follow fixed, prescriptive, or "correct and best" teaching methodologies, particularly, influenced and inspired by Anglo-American native

theorists. Kumaravadivelu (2006) considers this relationship by analogy with the marketplace. This phenomenon can be viewed that the native theorists take roles as producers of knowledge with the non-native practitioners serve as consumers of knowledge products. It is complex but clear that this kind of relationship “result[s] in a creation of privileged class ... and an underprivileged class” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 166) in ELT professional community. In agreement with Kumaravadivelu, Holliday (2005), Phan (2008a) state that this unequal and unfair relationship perpetuates the dichotomy between the native Self as superior and the non-native Other as inferior.

To critically observe the historical background, it is evident that Thailand has been switching from one method to another; for instance, from the grammar- translation to the audio-lingual approach, and from the audio-lingual to the communicative approach. This progression indicates that an old method has been replaced by a new one from time to time. It is not far-fetched to assume that such methods fail to fit in the local learning situation and meet communication needs and cultural expectations of Thai students. Kumaravadivelu (2003) claims that teaching methods developed by Anglo-American scholars fail to acknowledge the local linguistic and cultural knowledge and “deliberately denigrate the production and dissemination of [such local] knowledge”(p. 541). In other words, the use of local language (and culture) is irrelevant for learning and teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Phillipson (1992) has referred to this teaching dogma as “monolingual/monocultural tenet”. The tenet advocates that the teaching of EFL should be entirely through medium of English and emphasis on native-speaking culture. This tenet not only prevents local EFL teachers and learners from using their prior linguistic/cultural resources and experiences in class, but also “privilege[s] native speakers of English, most of whom do not share the language [and culture] of their learners” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 542)

In a nutshell, teaching methods developed in the West has always been introduced and practiced as a blanket application and they ignore local language and culture. This tends to create pitfalls instead of pathways to attainment of language teaching and learning in local contexts. As clearly claimed by Kumaravadivelu (2003), “methods that are manufactured and marketed as usable in all learning/teaching contexts cannot be useful to *any* learning/teaching context” (p. 544). Despite the fact that such fixed and prescriptive prototypical methods fail to be applicable to local learning and teaching context, they have long become major influences in operating and managing the mainstream ELT education programs in Thailand.

Issues in ELT Education in Thailand

There is no doubt that the fast growth in tourism and foreign investment in Thailand has catapulted English into becoming the country's most preferred, taught, learned and used foreign language in the 21st century. Consequently, there is an increasing demand for English and, therefore, a greater need for well-educated teachers of ELT. Most Thai tertiary institutions offer graduate programs for in-service and pre-service ELT teachers under different degree names; however, they share commonalities in curriculum, focus, and orientation.

From the history of ELT in the country presented in the earlier section, it is evident that Thai teachers of English have always been expected to follow a particular set of theoretical principles and classroom techniques. They cannot freely choose their own methodical approaches, design their own curriculum, and make any instructional judgment according to their experience and perspective. It is clearly evident that the local teachers have hardly gained control, confidence, and trust in becoming independent intellectuals in their own profession. The local in-service teachers have long been nurtured through traditional 'spoon-feeding', banking 'empty-vessel filling' (Freeman & Johnson, 1998), and restrictive 'correct and best teaching' (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999) education. This stagnancy can be viewed through the way the ELT programs in Thailand are organized and conducted.

ELT education programs in Thailand still operate under what Freeman and Johnson (1998) describe as "discrete amounts of knowledge usually in the form of theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context (p. 399)." The ELT classroom, pedagogy, and context that the teachers are initiated into do not encourage them to contextualize their position in terms of the politics of the discipline. The majority of the offered programs and courses promote prescription or a "correct or best" methodology for teaching (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999, p. 7). Being trained to overemphasize restricted and traditional methods, they cannot gain deeper awareness of their pedagogical approaches, contents, and goals. In turn, the students are confined to restricted and rigid patterns of instruction which their teachers are expected to follow.

Apart from those prototypical methods, the Teacher Education Standards reinforces and sustains the existence of marginalization and deprofessionalization in the ELT sphere. The standards take away teachers' control over their classrooms and prevent their voices from being heard and their identities from being shown.

Teacher Education Standards in Thailand

Global movement in educational reform has brought Teacher Education Standards into focus in educational institutions in Thailand. The introduction of the Standards came with *Quality Assurance*, a quality control system in higher education which started in 1996 when the Ministry of University Affairs announced the

policy and guidelines for *Quality Assurance* in Higher Education in line with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s suggestion:

The task of transforming systems of higher education into more efficient and relevant instruments for socio-economic development or of maintaining quality calls for systematic planning, particularly with a long-term perspective. Such planning needs to conform to both the economic and social developments which affect the form and content of higher education. (Komolmas, 1999)

The Bureau of Higher Education Standards was, at the same time, established to launch the Higher Education Development Plan to be effective from 1992 to present. The major goals are to maintain sound standards of higher education qualification and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. The bureau works with tertiary institutions to define academic standards and quality, assess all administrative and academic sectors in the institutions against each set of criteria.

Superficially, it seems that the quality system, as it promises, can ensure the public and people that appropriate standards are being achieved and a good quality education is being offered. In fact, the system only aims at encouraging the developing countries to “go global” by working toward becoming good homes for long-term foreign educational investments (Medley & Carroll, 2004). What can be implied here is that ‘long-term’ foreign investments cannot be from anywhere else but the western founder and fund givers. The UNESCO only suggests a blanket application and ignores local knowledge and interests. The standards initiated by UNESCO force the local practicing teachers to follow the fixed pedagogical forms and patterns. That is, they are marginalized deprofessionalized through being controlled by the western assessment.

The standards in Thailand function similarly to *outcomes assessment*, as mentioned by Newman and Hanauer (2005), which is “a clique of industrial quality-control protocol; teachers take the role of products, and their competencies are in the qualities to be controlled” (p.754). They provide an extensively critical review over the Teacher Education Standard in the United States. Their perspectives offer a guideline for pointing out a failure of employing the standards as they marginalize and deprofessionalize the local-practicing teachers through a set of restricted and rigid criteria.

The standards enforce a basic set of ways of thinking and doing; in a sense, they run counter to any form of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and professional development. According to Newman and Hanauer (2005), the Teacher Education Standards are likely to create pitfalls instead of pathways to the attainment of the ELT community. The standards fail because of their prescriptivism, instrumentalism, and impracticality. First,

the standards promote a “prescribed outcomes model” rather than a professional model. The prescribed outcomes model is confined to a form of curricular monoculture oriented toward canonical knowledge and best-and-correct methods. As a result, the model is very limited in responding to a diversity of local needs, interests, and contexts. Secondly, the standards represent and impose an instrumentalist view of teacher education by setting particular fixed criteria that local practicing teacher must follow and meet. This inhibits the possibility of pre-service and in-service teachers to become professionalized.

Those teachers are, as Pennycook (1989; cited in Newman and Hanauer, 2005) states, “nothing but a technician trained to transmit a fixed cannon of knowledge” (p. 761). Thirdly, the standards are impractical because “the failure of the descriptors to serve as benchmarks for degrees or depth of knowledge” (Newman and Hanauer, 2005, p. 762).

The local in-service and pre-service teachers have long been marginalized by the Anglo-American prototypical methods and deprofessionalized by the limited and controlled quality assessment system. Being confined to the restricted and rigid patterns of instruction, the teachers cannot create a classroom environment that promotes students’ personal, critical, and problem-solving development.

Conclusion

In order to foster a critical-thinking and problem-solving learning environment, I have argued in this paper that the local teachers themselves need to have control over their classroom, teaching performance, and profession. They need to have authority and freedom in choosing their own pedagogical approaches, designing their own curriculum, and have freedom in making their own instructional judgments according to their perspectives and experiences. Freeman and Johnson (1998) propose that these teachers should not be viewed as ‘empty vessels’

Drawing on work in general education, teacher educators have come to recognize that teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills. They are individuals who enter teacher education programs with prior experiences, personal values, and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do. (p. 401)

Teacher education programs must provide ELT teachers with a means to recognize themselves as more than just practitioners; to recognize themselves as intellectuals and scholars.

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