


Proposed Directions for the Meaningful Learning in the Thai EFL Context

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Abstract

I have revisited this paper and updated some information to provide recommendations and the rationale for the curriculum changes to the central educational administration in Thailand. There are many stages to discuss in the new curriculum planning. However, at this stage, I emphasize on the overall rationale why we need a new curriculum policy. That is what is urgently needed to bring about the changes. I am trying to point out some issues for those concerned to understand the present situation of teaching English in Thailand. I also explain what needs to be done to improve the students' performance in learning English. Broadly speaking, this paper analyzes the curriculum of English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Thailand. The reasons why the curriculum in use needs to be changed in order to support meaningful learning are discussed.

Keywords: Classroom practice; Curriculum change; Thai EFL curriculum

The EFL Classroom Practice in Thailand

This section describes the EFL curriculum practice in Thailand in general, and what seems to account for its existence and persistence. In Thailand, where English is taught as a compulsory foreign language, I have discovered that the instruction methodology, especially in reading, is not effective enough to make the English class really successful and stimulating one. Some previous studies revealed that more than half of the undergraduate students could not interact satisfactorily and efficiently when they had to communicate in English. In addition, their reading skill was the weakest skill they performed. The research noted that teachers failed to provide adequate practice for students to become strategic readers. In other words, teachers often emphasized word meanings and content acquisition over building reading strategies. They failed to provide meaningful learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving activities to the students. To sum up, when students attend schools, the instruction and practice in reading classes mainly involve translation method used by the instructors. As a consequence of the passive learning experiences, students develop a bottom-up view of reading, interacting passively with the text with the main purpose of knowing every unknown word and mastering the details of the text.

Furthermore, in a recent academic preview, Ministry of Education in Thailand profiled national scores indicating that only one-third of high school students read proficiently. In addition, approximately 75% of the tenth and eleventh graders scored below the proficient range—which represents a significant decline in reading performance from the prior years. More specifically, they are failing to achieve to be skilled English learners due to the traditional curriculum and instruction. Thus, I would like to see the change in the English curriculum that promotes study skills and reading strategies for students to promote meaningful learning as well as critical thinking.

The Proposed Changes in Classroom Practice

The issue of learners' knowledge and control of their cognitive activities has captured many educators' and researchers' interest (Flavell, 1979; Nickerson, 1988; Sternberg, 1984). Since the turn of the century, researchers

have been aware that reading involves the planning, checking, and evaluating activities. As an EFL student, I am aware that the ability to read English well and strategically is the key factor to reach the goal in higher education where numerous materials are in English. Many Thai students still struggle and are not proficient enough to read course materials required for the courses. Thus, the new English curriculum should promote reading strategies for Thai students to create meaningful, strategic, and independent learning for the academic purpose. I would like to see the changes in the extent to which the teaching of English in the Thai classroom context incorporates reading strategy approaches and in how teachers can be supported in making their students more aware of the study skills and problem-solving strategies. If this policy is not nationally implemented, there will not be much improvement in learning English among Thai students who are taught with the same traditional method as previously discussed.

Curriculum Change: A National Concern?

There are many factors in changing a curriculum. The heart of the curriculum change depends on what causes the change. When students do not make much progress in their learning, it is important to know the reasons why, and necessary actions must be taken to find suitable solutions to subside the situation (Watkins, 2000). There is no single model of learning that could be implemented to improve students' failure (Mosenthal, 1982). However, Reid (1999) suggests that good models of the role of the teacher and effective teaching can help to increase students' study performance. According to Carroll (1963), the success or failure of students rests in three important components: (1) characteristics of the learner; (2) the time devoted to learning and objectives; (3) the quality of education. As earlier discussed, it is evident that quality education seems to be the major influence that affects the learning outcomes in teaching English to Thai students. To modify the idea, quality of instruction is affected by the quality of instructional tools available to teachers and the quality of instructional techniques that teachers use to teach their students.

In Thailand, a new EFL curriculum is needed, or the learning has little meaning, regardless of where or by whom it is offered. The focus of interest is on what is learned and how it is presented. The objective is to provide grounds for the development of theories of effective practice to guide the conduct of curriculum tasks. To be specific, what needs to be changed to support meaningful learning for Thai students is that the new curriculum frameworks develop according to student-centered goals. The National Curriculum Development Group must be set up for the special aspects of the English curriculum to promote reading skills for students to solve the failure of learning English in Thailand. Due to the constraints and many factors involved in the change in curriculum such as the budgets, professional expertise, and politics, there are two practical and possible ways that can be urgently put into implementation in the present situation. That is, the emphasis in the new curriculum on the student as an active learner, a collaborator in the construction of knowledge in the classroom, and a contributor to the domain of literacy must be considered for the first place. Teachers must focus more on issues of learner-centered perspective. Secondly, National framework documents must provide clear guidance on reading development, instruction, and assessment for teachers to transform the new knowledge into classroom practice. English teachers need standards that are specific, and they need opportunities for collaborative, professional development to build knowledge for change and relate new learning to their local contexts.

To reach the goals is very important if we want to make the curriculum work for all students. It is indeed a challenging mission. What we will need to do to accomplish the national education goals depends on a wide range of considerations having to do with the meaningful and lifelong learning and how best to promote it. These factors involve the effective instructions, and language teachers' expertise.

Possible Practices for the Change

The above reflects and explains the problems of the current English curriculum in Thailand, and the outcomes of the reading instruction in particular. A central policy, and the question of effective practice rest in the implementation of new methods and programs. There are many factors involved in supporting the curriculum change, namely, textbook policies, cultural, linguistic, intellectual, socioeconomic status diversity, family or community groups, and so on. However, after the analysis of the situation in Thailand, I would propose three possible and practical ways to promote the learning of English, especially the reading strategies, in the reform plan at the primary stage. These include setting clear goals of the curriculum policy, a national professional development program to increase teachers' expertise in effective instructions, and the guidelines for classroom practice.

1. Setting clear goals

The first step is to set clear goals and standards, which require much thought. The standards must spell out what students need to learn. In other words, the curriculum policy must provide a solid foundation for content based on the national standards. The main theme of the curriculum policy is that teachers must foster study skills/strategies for students in a meaningful learning environment. The curriculum component that is developed must reflect the following criteria:

- Focuses on students and their learning: Teaching and learning activities focus on student-generated knowledge and problem-solving processes as can be seen from the expected learner outcomes.
- Reflects the practices for teaching and learning: Includes best practices to activate student interest and literacy and enhance student achievement.
- Provides experiences based on various knowledge sources. Students engage in problem-solving and high-level thinking activities.

2. Professional Development

Special training for teachers must be carried out to make sure that teachers possess adequate understanding and expertise of the instructions. This can be done in the form of seminars, and teacher training—schoolwide, districtwide, and nationwide. Teachers must be equipped with new knowledge of a variety of strategies in teaching their students to become independent and critical learners. The new instruction techniques that should be promoted include using the think-aloud for reading instruction (Oster, 2001), reader response approaches (Spiegel, 1998), implementing graphic organizer notebooks (Fisher, 2001), and Collaborative Strategic Reading (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999). The trainers will be recruited from the veteran teachers who have a lot of experience in teaching and from those who have graduated from abroad with the expertise in the field of teacher education or similar fields. The training must emphasize the workshop format so that the attending teachers have a chance to demonstrate these techniques and know clearly what they are supposed to follow in each step of the techniques. The useful manuals of important instructional strategies must be prepared and distributed to the training teachers for future references.

3. Classroom Practice

The curriculum framework must be well-done for teachers to transform the standards into classroom practice. There must be instruction guidelines or suggested activities that bear relationships to the national standards. The new curriculum must emphasize the uses of language. The curriculum framework must allow students to examine the broad connections of ideas, information, issues, themes, and perspectives across different genres of readings and writings. The major areas of reading in the curriculum must appear to be activities rather than concepts. In classroom practice, it is important that schools and teachers provide students with enough opportunities to interact with the texts in meaningful and practical manners. They must encourage students to reflect and explore what strategies help them to complete the tasks. In addition, teachers should regularly read with them using texts of different genres and enhance their active participation in the discussion. Such techniques are more likely to develop students as strategic learners.

Teachers must bear in mind that they should explain why the strategy is important for a particular task. They should model the strategy and have students practice it immediately in class and again in homework assignments. They should have a class discussion about the strategy they use after students have practiced it. Teachers must be aware that they need to change their teaching style from translating everything to students to spending some time practicing new strategies with them so that they can use them independently.

Teachers will need to update themselves with new knowledge about multiple instructions that can support the learners. That is why the plan must emphasize the continual teacher development. Teachers must promote adoption of instruction strategies, materials, etc., based on what works best for the students. To illustrate, the suitable activities, the use of technology, materials, and assessments must be designed to foster the study skills and strategies. Teachers should incorporate cooperative learning format, student research projects, and lessons that require students to seek knowledge from sources other than the textbooks or the teacher because this will make students feel that they really learn something meaningfully, which is the ultimate goal of the new curriculum policy.

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