Reflections on Adolescent English Literacy in Thailand

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Abstract

In this paper, I present the overall educational situation in Asia, which could reflect the educational issues in Thailand, where I come from. The reason is to provide the basic background knowledge of the common issues of education in Asia as a stepping stone prior to going into details of the topic in focus, which is the adolescent literacy. I also believe that the general ideas will enlighten those who do not know much about Asia, and will help them understand more clearly about my views and discussion in the subsequent sections. I provide a lot of information from my personal analysis on education in Thailand. This broad picture will lead to the second section, which specifically focuses on the literature reviews on adolescent literacy, the key issue of this paper. And lastly, I will discuss my reflections on the issue of teaching English as a foreign language for young students in Thailand. My analysis and synthesis regarding the instruction of English to young adolescents will be illustrated from my dimensions with the support of relevant theories. I have decided to reflect on teaching English for young students and adolescents because it is the topic under controversy in my country, and, of course, it is the topic of my interest and can be applied to any languages.

Introduction

Background of Educational Situations in Asia

At no time in any region of the world have education systems expanded as fast or as effectively as have those in Asia in the past thirty years. Yet, despite the education successes across the region, many countries of the region consider the management of their education system to be weak. The need to improve school administration has been one of the most widely advocated and least examined elements in the effort to strengthen education in Asia (Chapman, 2000). Many countries in Asia realize the problem, thus, their governments try to send their staff to further their studies in western countries including America, where education systems are considered more advanced, to expand and modernize their vision and horizon, with the hope to bring back the new knowledge to develop the countries.

Although virtually every country in Asia has designed improving educational quality as one of their highest national priorities over the next decade, when pressed to proclaim how that quality will be improved, the answers are varied and vague. In fact, educational quality is one of the most confusing concepts in the literature. It is variously used to refer to inputs (number of teachers, amount of teachers, amount of teacher training, and number of textbooks), processes (amount of direct instructional time and lecture vs. other means of presentation), outputs (test scores), and outcomes (ability to perform well in subsequent employment) (Chapman & Adams, 1998; Windham & Chapman, 1990). One major education policy initiative across the region over the next decade is likely to be a push toward higher quality instruction. For present purposes, educational quality refers to the extent to which an education system provides relevant, age-appropriate, and culturally appropriate instruction. It is typically measured in terms of student learning. Even when resources are available, the problem administrators face in improving school quality is knowing which inputs and actions will lead to the results they seek. There is little understanding of how to convert these additional resources into improved learning experiences for students. That conversion depends largely on the reasons for the low performance in the first place. Low achievement often, however, stems from a more complex constellation of problems. For example, if low student performance reflects a combination of poor teacher performance, low student motivation, poor instructional supervision at the school level, and lack of parental

encouragement, it may not be clear how the money can be best spent to resolve the problem, fixing any one weakness may not be sufficient to resolve the multisource problem. One consequence of this shift toward quality is that educators at all levels will need a better understanding of which actions are likely to improve education (Chapman, 2000).

I was born in Thailand. Luckily enough, I have had numerous opportunities to explore the real world outside my country for work, pleasure, and academic purposes. These experiences enriched, expanded, influenced, and enlightened not only my knowledge of the world in various ways, but also my horizon, and vision. My perspectives on life, social problems, and solutions to the problems have been broadened. I have gained indescribable experiences with the exposure of multicultural environments that tremendously affect my outlook on life. There are so many problems in my country, which need to be solved. I have seen several attempts of government after government to tackle them, but they are not yet completely successful in fulfilling their policy as pledged to better the well-being of the people. This is due to many factors, I know. But one of the best solutions that can develop, improve and upgrade the lives of the people is to give them education. I strongly believe that education is the best treatment and diagnosis to cure most of the chronic social problems and create the progress to the country.

I claim that the educational system needs to be revolutionized and reshaped in my country. However, this effort is not an easy thing to do in many countries. As I mentioned earlier, the background of educational situation in Asia serves well as a stepping stone to pave the base of the knowledge for those who have no idea about education in Asia before. I keep saying to many friends of mine that I wish to see one day in the future that the education system will be like the one implemented in many well-developed countries. I hope that in the near future, there will be a group of educators who see the importance of adolescent literacy sit down, and form teamwork to discuss the critical issues regarding adolescent literacy. I hope to see an English journal of adolescent literacy in Thailand to exist like it does in America and many other countries. The reason I pay attention to adolescent literacy is that there is little or hardly any focus placed on young children and adolescents in helping and supporting them well enough in terms of education even though they are the future of the country. The

literacy plays a very important role on them, which I will discuss in the accompanying section.

Roles of Adolescent Literacy

Literacy has an important function in the development of individual, cultural, and social identities. Adolescents take cues on how to act, interact, and understand from their literate experiences, and cues taken from past literate experiences influence new literate activities (Phelps, 1998). However, much like the complex lives of adolescents, the field of adolescent literacy has been neglected, misunderstood, and often marginalized, not only in an education sense, but in a broader social context as well. As a result, many middle and high schools provide limited instructional programs to meet the literacy needs of adolescents (Vacca, 1998). For all the differences, adolescents have one thing in common: Their personal literacies are not being accommodated in the mainstream school curriculum. Neilsen (cited in Phelps, 1998) observed in his study of American students in urban northern California that none of these young people seem to be particularly well served by the school they attend. In response to a " pervasive neglect of adolescent reading," a resolution on adolescent literacy by the International Reading Association addresses the rights of adolescent readers, calling for homes, communities, and a nation that will not only support their efforts to achieve advanced levels of literacy, but also provides the resources necessary for them to succeed (cited in Muller, 2001). Recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test results indicate that while the vast majority of American youth reach basic literacy levels, few are gaining the literacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions that would enable them to successfully engage in higher level, problem-solving literacy of the kind required in an information generating and information transforming economy (cited in Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). The literature on adolescent literacies suggests the need for more support and understanding for adolescents because literacy supported important personal and social needs in the lives of the adolescents. Specifically, through literacy, they explored and expressed their sense of identity and examined critical issues related to prejudice, racism, and discrimination (Noll, 1998).

As an educator in reading education, I become interested in learning more about the roles of literacy in the lives of adolescents, both inside and outside of school. I know the influence of literature and writing to help adolescents generate understandings about the personal and social issues that are important to them. However, I also realize that these school experiences represent just one part of their overall literacy practices. After school, I would like to know in what ways it is important to them. This knowledge will help us support what they need to help them improve their literacy. To reach the goal, I think it is important to conduct research to explore adolescents' practices in their everyday lives and the sense they make use of those experiences as reflections to help teachers understand adolescent literacies better and develop appropriate instructional literacy programs to support them to move beyond their limiting conceptions of literacy.

Roles of Schooled Literacy

Schooled literacy includes literacy enactments characterized by conventional forms of practices and products found in school (Barton, 1994). Students read textbooks and answer questions at the end of chapters; they write themed reports and fill out worksheets. Officially, reading and writing are viewed as either school subjects or learning tools whose form and function are defined by teachers, curriculum directors, school boards, and administrators. Schooled literacy is both a tool for learning content and an artifact of the broader school culture. Reading and writing strategies are promoted as useful tools across the secondary disciplines in the genre of content-area literacy (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). By the time students reach adolescence, their experiences with reading materials and practices in school have taught them to dislike schooled literacy activities.

From my experience and my observation in classes in Thailand, the instruction techniques and methodologies are very important to attract students' attention, but many teachers continue to use the same traditional method to teach their students. They do not try to encourage students to get involved in the class participation and interaction. As a consequence, students lose interest and pay no attention to the lessons. Many times, students lose motivation once they have to read because they are told to read the assigned chapters of a book and then there would be a quiz on it. I think this kind of assignment causes students to read because a mark is being placed on it, not because they are genuinely interested in the material. They just strictly read through the chapters in order to get through the quiz, rather than reading it for fun or pleasure or personal interest. Once the test or quiz is over, any material they retain from the book is mostly forgotten. My suggestion in the reading class is that students should be able to choose whatever materials at whatever reading level they feel comfortable with. I think it is better to have a child enjoy reading a book that is below his or her reading level, rather than not reading at all. Teachers should start with something students are at least interested in. If such freedom of choice is offered, more students might feel happier to pick up a book

Each day in school, adolescents engage in unofficial literate enactments based on their lives and popular culture. They engage in literate activities as a way of defining their social boundaries (Finders, 1996; Rubin, 1995). Within the discourse of nonacademic literacy, students convey their emotions, thoughts, voices, and social and cultural roots. They use these forms to help construct their social identities. Gee (2000) said that knowledge and intelligence are seen as distributed across the social practices (including language practices) and the various tools, technologies, and semiotic systems that a given community of practice uses in order to carry out its characteristic activities.

Literacy in Community

For adolescents, growing in literacy means being continually stretched. Because of this, adolescents deserve all the support they can get, not only from school but also from their families, communities, and the nation (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Parents play an important role. They help adolescents extend and consolidate their literacy by engaging them in discussions about what they read, responding actively to the social activities they like. Parents also become partners with educators in supporting their adolescents' growth (Moore et al, 1999). As I mentioned earlier, literacy has an important function in the development of individual, cultural, and social identities. Adolescents need spaces to explore multiple literacies in order to take cues on how to act, interact, and understand from their literate experiences.

Teachers should bear this important awareness in mind to support and suggest their students to get involved with the appropriate activities they are interested in. The support the students gain definitely helps them to achieve advanced levels of literacy in a broader context, not only in the classroom. I note this point especially to the Thai teachers because we cannot expect much from the students' parents to encourage and support their kids to get engaged in the activities outside the classroom and school. The majority of the Thai people are quite poor, especially in the country. Thus, their parents will not understand and do not care much about the importance of education. The ideal Thai teachers should consume this responsibility for the sake of the students' educational success.

Reflections on Teaching English to Young Students in Thailand

There has been an idea of implementing the education policy of making English as a compulsory subject in the first grade for students in Thailand. Superficially, the idea seems great as it will help young Thai students to study English when they are quite young, and that will help them to communicate in English better. There is no doubt about that in case Thailand is ready to implement that policy. Considering many authentic factors and reality about the educational situations in Thailand, I completely disagree on that idea and I will point out why I am against that policy. Up to this point, you may wonder why I first talk about the educational situations in Asia, then the focus is on adolescent literacy, and now I discuss the education policy in Thailand, which seems to be out of place. In fact, it is not. Thailand lacks the real support of young students' literacy in terms of appropriate materials, curriculum, teaching methodologies,

and personnel. I would like to reflect why the implementation of the policy to allow Thai students to study English at the primary level is inappropriate.

In Thailand, there is little empirical research on child and adolescent's literacy. Ineffective teaching method is used without much improvement for the teachers. In the reading class, most teachers translate the meaning of the reading passages word by word, phrase by phrase, or sentence by sentence, depending on the difficulty level of the texts. In the grammar class, students are asked to memorize the rules, and they are hardly given an opportunity to use or practice them in the appropriate communicative contexts. In the writing class, it is hardly open for students to study because it is optional. The teachers do not know how to teach it so the course is not offered. Teachers lack initiatives in brushing up their knowledge. Many of them do not read English journals as they see no importance in it. To clarify, they do not need to because there is no stimulation for them to read. It seems that the learning-teaching process in Thailand fails. There is very little development in the teaching and learning styles. This is not exaggerated and can be proved with the illustration in that more than sixty per cent (personal estimate) of the Thai students in the big cities, especially in Bangkok, attend the cram schools, which are mushrooming business everywhere. Moreover, it is very common for Thai students to study extra hours after school and at the weekends as a tutorial course. Thai students spend so much time studying English, but the fact is that not many of them can communicate at a satisfactory level. This may indicate that there must be something wrong with the teaching method. To initiate the policy to teach English at the primary level, Thailand needs to have quality teachers who can be a model for their students. They need to have a good knowledge of English, and know how to make the classroom an interesting and stimulating one. But most teachers who teach English in most schools are not really English teachers. They have to teach many subjects, and in some schools every teacher has to teach English no matter how much knowledge s/he has. I propose Thailand needs to have enough quality English teachers before putting the policy into effect. Young students need more support and understanding from their teachers to succeed in their education as we can learn from the above literature. If Thailand is not ready to produce qualified English teachers, it is better to postpone the policy. If the students learn something wrong from the teachers who are not keen on English, then they need to be corrected again later. And the process of correcting things that are already in the students' head is very difficult. Those who are in the education administration need to have a good knowledge about second language methodology and acquisition, as well as young children's literacy theory before initiating a policy about foreign language for young children. They need to know what the

problems are, and how to solve them with real understanding. They need to consider the potentiality of their country in many ways including whether they have enough quality personnel who have sound knowledge on specific areas, appropriate curriculum and instruction methodologies, and materials.

Conclusion

The paper gives an overall picture of the role of literacy in adolescents' life that helps us gain insight into the literacy learning and schooling experience of adolescents in general. The significance in this paper is the reflections on adolescents' literacies and more support of learning materials, new technologies, better instruction strategies, and opportunities given to them to explore the knowledge of the world, their identities, and their spaces in and outside the classrooms. The analysis presented in the paper is in agreement with various studies represented in "Reconceptualising the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives" (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps & Waff, 1998) which demonstrate:

a)   Adolescent literacy is more complex and sophisticated than what is traditionally considered within school-based literate activity. Adolescents have multiple literacies.

b)   Adolescents therefore have multiple texts and an expanded notion of text which includes films, CD-ROM, the Internet, popular music, television, magazine, newspapers.

c)   Literacy plays an important role in the development of adolescents individual and social identities.

d)   Adolescents need spaces in schools to explore and experiment with multiple literacies and receive feedback from peers and adults.

In supporting adolescents' literacy growth, adolescents deserve nothing less than a comprehensive effort to help their continued development as readers and writers. Teachers should understand the nature of their students and the roles of literacies playing on them. Teachers should provide a program and teaching technique, which is a coherent pattern of expectations that underline new relationships between students, teachers, and the world of ideas (Windschitl, 1999) to explore the diversity of learning issues that are in students' interests. The curriculum should, in addition, allow students to exercise and shape their sense of themselves in a social world.

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