

# Ready or Not? The State of Thai Schools in Response to the ASEAN English Language Policy

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## Abstract

This article investigated the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint in the Roadmap for ASEAN Community 2015 with a focus on the importance of English as a common language and the opportunities it presents for citizens of ASEAN nations. As English is a basic tool for communication among the peoples of ASEAN community, the study explored the preparedness of Thailand in becoming part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Community in the year 2015. Current status of ASEAN-related policy led by the Ministry of Education (MoE) of Thailand, the National curriculum, Thai teachers and ability of Grades 1-12 students in the Thai educational system are examined. Factors that will affect Thailand's standing as an ASEAN Community member country were pointed out with recommendations for improvements so that the nation can achieve its goal of an English-speaking populace in response to the ASEAN educational and language policy as well as the ASEAN market.

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## Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) integration of ten countries comprising Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam in 2015 will lead to changes in policy on economics, politics, law, society and culture for every member country. At the ASEAN Summit in November 2007, the ASEAN Charter was introduced. Article 34, “Working Language of ASEAN” reads: “The working language of ASEAN shall be English.” (Charter of the association of Southeast Asian nations, 2008, p.28). This has inevitably affected Thailand in every aspect of English teaching ranging from teaching policy, teaching methodology and student learning.

In examining the readiness of Thailand through the perspective of English teaching, we might begin with recent efforts. In 2008, the nation implemented its most recent English curriculum in Thailand Basic Education Core Curriculum, which is the product of a ten-year experimental application of the Basic Education Curriculum 2001. The Bilingual Program, where different subjects like Math and Science are taught in English and Thai and the English Program where selected subjects are taught only in English were based on the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008. Recently, the Ministry of Education of Thailand launched a five-point program for preparing its people to be ready for ASEAN.

Regarding the English proficiency of Thai students’, Grade 6, Grade 9 and Grade 12 graduates from the country’s compulsory education system are required to take an Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) annually (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2013) but the participating students have not shown adequate results in the O-NET. Moreover, in an evaluation of adult English proficiency in 60 countries conducted by English First (EF) in 2012, (EF 2012) Thailand was ranked in the “very low proficiency” category. In 2009, a sampling group of 6,225 Thai 15-year-old students across the nation joined in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (ISPT, 2010, OECD, 2010) and in 2012, another sampling group of 6,606 Thai 15-year-old students showed that analytical skills, an important factors in language communication, were below average (Thai students’ Pisa, 2013).

This article will review the ASEAN Roadmap 2015 which focuses on the promotion of English language use, investigate the planning and implementation of Ministry of Education's English teaching in compulsory grade levels (Grades 1-12) in Thailand, analyze existing problems and propose some practical solutions.

The article consists of three main parts: (1) Expectations from ASEAN on ASEAN member countries, (2) Current status of English Teaching in Thailand (3) Recommendations for improvements in English Teaching in Thailand.

### **Expectations of member countries**

According to the Roadmap for ASEAN Community 2015 (ASEAN Affairs Department, 2013), the ASEAN Leaders adopted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II) in Bali, Indonesia on 7 October 2003 to establish an ASEAN Community by 2020. At the 12th ASEAN Summit on 13th January 2007 in Cebu, Philippines, the leaders affirmed their strong commitment to accelerate the establishment of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The foundation of the ASEAN Community consists of three areas or "community pillars." These pillars consist of are the political and security community, the economic community, and the socio-cultural community, all of which are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing for the purpose of ensuring durable peace, stability, and shared prosperity in the region.

To ensure that actions are undertaken to promote the establishment of an ASEAN Community, blueprints to accompany each community pillar have been drafted and implemented among ASEAN country members. These include an ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint, an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint and an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint.

The importance of English language and educational cooperation among the ASEAN countries is identified in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint. The primary goal of the ASCC is to assist in realizing an ASEAN Community that is people-centered and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN. This will be done by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious and in which the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of its citizens are enhanced. The ASCC shall contribute to promoting sustainable development and building a strong foundation for greater understanding, good neighborliness, and a shared sense of responsibility. We can see that shared communication in English is essential to the success of these missions.

The ASCC Blueprint in the Roadmap for ASEAN Community 2015 (2013) includes the following characteristics: (A) Human Development; (B) Social Welfare and Protection; (C) Social Justice and Rights; (D) Ensuring Environment Sustainability; (E) Building the ASEAN Identity; and (F) Narrowing the Development Gap. In Item (A): Human Development, which consists of plans A.1-A.7, the focus is on promoting and investing in education and life-long learning, human resource training and capacity building, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship, promoting the use of English language, ICT and applied science and technology in socio-economic development activities. Promoting the use of English language was mentioned in two action plans: A.1 with a focus on education and A.2 with a focus on use in the workplace.

Under A.1 Advancing and prioritizing education, an emphasis on English promotion and education are clearly shown as well as a guarantee of primary education. Furthermore, a knowledge-based society is prioritized. In order to achieve human development, as pointed out in the action plan numbered xviii, the focus is “to support the citizens of Member States to become proficient in the English language, so that the citizens of the ASEAN region are able to communicate directly with one another and participate in the broader international community” (p. 80). English is thus a major tool for merging ASEAN people into a single community and for strengthening exchange and collaborations. It is these exchanges which Thailand cannot avoid regardless of the state of preparedness its citizens may be.

Under A.2, Investing in human resource development, the strategic objective is to enhance and improve the capacity of ASEAN human resource through strategic programs and develop a qualified, competent and well-prepared ASEAN labor force that would benefit from as well as cope with the challenges of regional integration. One of the actions presented is to promote the use of English as an international business language at the work place. Hence, English will play a major role in Thai people’s working environments.

In connection to the ASCC Blueprint in the Roadmap for ASEAN Community 2015, English will be considered a language for education and careers. In order for people in the member nations to be able to communicate proficiently in both of these areas, the nation’s policy and other factors will need to be implemented with the goal of increasing the populace’s English language ability as well as enhancing their analytical skills for participation in the global arena.

## Current Issues of English Teaching in Thailand

In accordance with action plans from the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint, English is a major tool for combining ASEAN people into one nation. In this section, we will consider (2.1) Thailand's ASEAN-related educational policy, (2.2) curriculum, (2.3) teachers and (2.4) students in order to determine which the state of Thailand's preparedness for inclusion in the ASEAN Community.

### 1. Issues with ASEAN Policy by Thai Ministry of Education

In conjunction with the transformation Thailand has to undergo for inclusion as one of the ASEAN member countries in the year 2015, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has proposed a strategic plan to be implemented between the years of 2012 and 2015 based on the ASCC Blueprint (Hanirattisai, 2013). This plan, The Thailand Educational Strategic Plan for ASEAN Community in 2015 will effectively cover the educational framework and reinforce capacity building among Thai students and Thai citizens in order for them to be ready for the coming ASEAN Community in 2015. This strategic plan is composed of five strategies as follows:

#### Strategy 1: ASEAN awareness

In this strategy, the main focus is to share ASEAN knowledge and positive attitudes toward ASEAN among Thai teachers, students and citizens.

#### Strategy 2: Improving capacity of Thai students and citizens for becoming an ASEAN Community member country

In this strategy, the main focus is to ensure that Thai students and citizens are equipped with the English language, foreign languages of ASEAN member countries, ICT and occupation-related skills for the industrial change, better job opportunities and human capacity building.

#### Strategy 3: Improving educational standards to reinforce educational exchange among ASEAN member countries

This strategy aims to elevate Thailand's educational standards and promote education networking in various levels of ASEAN educational institutions with the ultimate goal of mutual agreement on academic qualifications. It aims to continue university networking and enhance and support student and staff exchanges and professional interactions, improve long distance and life-long learning systems through e-learning, and promote and improve vocational education and job-related training as well as increase collaboration among ASEAN Community members.

Strategy 4: Preparation for ASEAN free education area in order to become part of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

To prepare for ASEAN free education area by reaching a mutual agreement on education. To improve expertise in major occupations in order to serve free education area and free labor movement areas.

Strategy 5: To improve quality of Thai adolescents so that they can become the main part of the success of Thailand in becoming part of ASEAN.

In summary, the MOE strategies for building strong foundations for Thai students and people to become ASEAN members focus on providing ASEAN knowledge sharing projects in different institutions of Thailand, boosting knowledge sharing of English and other foreign languages which belong to ASEAN country members, supporting educational collaborations, investing on technology and upgrading desirable qualifications of students, especially those in secondary levels. However, it is noticeable that English teachers have not been mentioned as one of the main areas that need urgent attention. On the other hand, full attention has been given to preparation for other contributing factors, for example, e-learning and IT trainings.

## 2. Issues with the 2008 English Curriculum of Thailand

Compulsory education in Thailand is based on the Basic Education Core Curriculum of the year 2008. The necessity of foreign language learning is well defined in this abovementioned curriculum as “an important tool for communication, education, seeking knowledge, livelihood and creating understanding of cultures and visions of the world community” (MoE, 2008, p.266).

According to the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008, eight core subjects form the National Curriculum: Thai language, mathematics, science, social studies, religion and culture, health and physical education, arts, careers and technology, and foreign languages. This curriculum is designed for any schools conducting normal compulsory education which is divided into 6 years of primary education level, (Grades 1-6 or Prathom 1 to 6) followed by 3 years of lower secondary education level (Grades 7-9 or Mattayom 1 to 3) and 3 years of upper secondary education level (Grades 10-12 or Mattayom 4 to 6). Flexibility is built into the curriculum in order to integrate local wisdom and culture, so that it is consistent with set learning standards in each of the core subject groups. The promotion of thinking skills, self-learning strategies and moral development is the focus of teaching and learning in the Thai National Curriculum.

For school in general, the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 was implemented for Grades 1-6 and Grades 7 and 10 in the academic year 2010; Grades 7, 8, 10 and 11 in the academic year 2011; and all grades from the academic year 2012 onwards. Like French, German, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Pali and languages of neighbouring countries, English in this most recent curriculum is referred to as a foreign language. The main English subject contents include:

- Language for Communication: use of foreign languages in listening, speaking, reading and writing, exchanging data and information, expressing feelings and opinions, interpreting, presenting data, concepts and views on various matters, and creating interpersonal relationships appropriately
- Language and Culture: use of foreign languages in accordance with the culture of native speakers; relationships, similarities and differences between languages and cultures of native speakers; language and cultures of native speakers and Thai culture; and appropriate application
- Language and Relationship with Other Learning Areas: use of foreign languages to link knowledge with other learning areas, to seek knowledge and to broaden learners' world views.
- Language and Relationship with Community and the World: use of foreign languages in various situations in the classroom, in community and in the global society, forming a basic tool for further education livelihood and exchange of knowledge with the global society.

The quality of grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 graduates is also clearly stated as an important factor for teaching, studying and evaluation.

To provide information to the schools and to prove how well students in Grade 6 and Grade 9 students as well as Grade 12 graduates can perform in eight core subject groups through the implementation of the Basic Education Curriculum of the year 2008, the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (Public Organization) annually conducts an Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET). The results showed that Thai students scored low on the O-NET English exam (Saengpassa & Khaopa, 2012). Furthermore, Thailand ranked sixth in the Education First (EF) Adult English Proficiency ranking among the other ASEAN member countries including Singapore and Vietnam. And finally, Thai students placed low in their reading literacy from their PISA, a test conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) both in 2009 and 2012 (Thai students' Pisa, 2013).

### 3. Issues regarding Thai Teachers of English

Both quantity and quality of Thai teachers of English in Thailand are prevailing challenges in Thailand English education. According to Mackenzie (2005), a lack of qualified English teachers has been reported. Moreover, most teachers who are now performing their English teaching duties in Thai schools either possess low English ability or have not received their Bachelor's degree in English teaching. Dr. Wattanaporn of English Language Projects Office under the Ministry of Education (MoE), as cited in Mackenzie (2005) reported in an MoE curriculum reform meeting that of the 114,000 English teachers surveyed, 50 percent of Thai teachers has self-reported an intermediate level of language ability or above. Less than 8% self-reported an advanced level while 42% reported that they were beginners. Furthermore, it was revealed that 80% of English language teachers are non-English majors and had never been formally trained as English teachers. 30% are graded by MoE criteria as A-grade teachers, 40% as B-grade and 30% as C-grade.

It is evident that Thailand is still seeking English native English teachers to support Thai students in their language learning although it is not considered a sustainable way out. According to Wilang and Teo (2012), hundreds of native English speaking teachers have been employed for two-month English teaching positions to compensate for the shortages of Thai English teachers (De Lotbinière, 2011). The short time in which these foreign teachers are generally hired means that Thai students cannot fully benefit from their teaching. Nagi (2012) also emphasized the importance of high performance Thai English teachers by emphasizing that Thailand's English teaching and learning problems cannot be solved by employing native speakers alone.

#### 40 Issues on Grades 1--12 Thai Students' English Proficiency Achievement

English proficiency of Thai students who have gone through the Thai Basic Curriculum 2008 is far from satisfactory. According to Saengpassa & Khaopa (2012), the 2011 average O-NET scores in the most important subjects were below standard: less than 20% for Math and English and 30.90% for Sciences.

Another international ranking called English Proficiency Index 2012, conducted by English First (EF) revealed that Thailand placed 53rd in English proficiency out of 54 participating countries and is ranked 6th among ASEAN member countries. At this proficiency level in English, Thailand will lag behind in the competitive world of business, education, science, and technology if the teaching and learning of English is not improved (Prapphal, 2003, Fry, 2012).



In the PISA 2009 score ranking by country/economy, Thailand falls in the bottom 25%, with scores on par with those of Mexico, Romania and Uruguay. The nation ranks above 15 countries in the developing world such as Columbia, Brazil, Indonesia, Tunisia, Argentina, Kazakhstan, Albania, Peru, and Azerbaijan, and below other countries in comparable stages of economic development such as Chile, Turkey and Romania (OECD, 2010). In the PISA 2012 ranking, the scores can be seen as an improvement but they are still “behind the global average” (Khaopa, 2013). Another issue worth considering is the fact that most Thai students are lacking in motivation. They are often described as “lazy and unmotivated to learn” (Krishnan, 2007). When joining the ASEAN Community, it is possible that Thai students will be well aware of extrinsic motivation or external rewards such as job opportunity and job security. Having said that, intrinsic motivation driven by internal rewards cannot be overlooked as it is equally important in language learning (Jordan, 1997).

### **Challenges in English Teaching in Thailand and Recommendations**

In this part, four main limitations that were found existing in English education of Thailand are presented with suggested solutions.

#### **1. Challenges in English Teaching**

##### **1.1 Limitations on the MoE Thailand Educational Strategic Plan for ASEAN Community in 2015**

Five strategies implemented by the MoE emphasize various factors to contribute to the success of becoming a productive ASEAN Community country in the year 2015. English professional training courses should be one of the priorities in any MoE plan, but in reality they are not included in Thailand’s Educational Strategic Plan for ASEAN Community in 2015. The importance of prioritizing the needs for English teachers’ professional development coincides with Fry (2012) and Nagi (2012).

Additionally, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) might not be one of the leading factors which can make the country a successful member of ASEAN Community. According to Prapphal (2002) technology should be considered supplementary in teaching. Moreover, one of the OECD findings implied that technology advancement has no correlation with students’ English literacy (IPST, 2010).

## 1.2 Limitations on the 2008 English Curriculum of Thailand

The failure of Grades 1-12 in Thai compulsory educational system reveals the imperfections of the 2008 National English Curriculum of Thailand. The 2008 English Curriculum was viewed as a General English Curriculum and contents of each core subject could be different from school to school as long as they meet the expected learning outcomes of each grade level. The 2008 English Curriculum thus presents a lack of unity and difficulty in curriculum quality control. Students who have completed the curriculum track have performed below standard on the Thai ONET and placed fairly low in further international English proficiency testing by English First (EF).

It is undeniable that precedence has been placed over English proficiency ranking in today's world. Due to the fact that Thailand is ranked at the bottom in many publicized standardized exams, Thailand's English curriculum should be subjected to changes according to skills needed for those international standardized tests and for the ASEAN Community. O-NET, which is mainly used to rank Thai schools in primary and secondary levels, is often criticized for its content and multiple-choice format. This also needs a careful revision if Thailand continues to require the National test for their students in compulsory education.

## 1.3 Limitations on Thai Teachers

Lack of English teachers and teachers lacking proper teaching credentials have been major problems for Thailand. In a survey conducted by Noom-ura (2013), thirty-four teachers of English from nine schools in Central Thailand's Secondary Educational Service Areas (SESAs) answered questions on the topic of English-Teaching Problems in Thailand and Thai Teachers' Professional Development Needs. It was found that English teachers' top five highest ranks of their problems were 1) teaching writing, 2) incorporating experiential learning into English classes, 3) their own minimal use and/or exposure to English, 4) teaching listening and speaking, and 5) using games and songs effectively in English classes. Sarobol (2012) suggested Thai English teachers to embark on English classroom research or action research, for they can help solve classroom problems and create teaching aids or teaching innovation.

#### 1.4 Limitations on Grades 1-12 Thai Students

The English proficiency Thai students in the compulsory education cannot be easily increased without proper teachers' professional training. Additionally, reviews from some teachers in Thailand have showed that Thai students are inactive in classroom and do not put enough efforts in their studying. Thai students have been reported as lacking in critical thinking skills (Sivarnee, 2013). Furthermore, Thai students study but do not have goals and directions. They study according to trends and family pressure, and complete a bachelor degree simply to enter the work force (UNESCO Bangkok, 2011).

#### 2. Where to go from here: Thailand's preparedness for ASEAN

In reviewing the problems of Thailand's preparedness for participation as an ASEAN Community member country in the year 2015, a teachers' professional development policy has been proposed by MoE as one of the long-term solutions. When good teachers are utilized, Thai students will consequently be productive and produce an effective output which will fit in the objectives of ASCC Blueprint both in the educational area (A.1) and the professional one (A.2). With proper training for English teachers, the Thai MoE will be able to smoothly run their academic exchange and professional networking project among ASEAN Community nations as Thai teachers will be capable of serving and representing the country.

The forming of ASEAN Community 2015 will allow the flow of foreign investments in the region and the expansion of career opportunities for skilled labor in the Thai labor market. It thus becomes necessary for the Thai laborers to acquire English language proficiency and other work skills needed for employment and career advancement (Biggs, 2012). As one researcher commented, however, Thailand's national curriculum is not in alignment with the kind of labor envisioned by the ASEAN Community and is in fact "out of touch with the ...skills demanded by the fast-changing 21st-century job market" (Khaopa, 2013, para.1) One way to confront this challenge could be a revised version of the English Education Curriculum, written so that Science and Mathematics are delivered in both English and Thai whereas English literacy with vocabulary, grammar, reading and critical thinking skills are the main focus in Thai primary English classrooms. English Curriculum for secondary schools should combine the idea of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching methodology with specifications on what skills and abilities students are expected to possess at the end of the course.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) said that ESP should be seen as “an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning” Currently, Thai people’s success in English ability is one of the ultimate goals of Thailand in becoming part of the ASEAN Community. According to Belchor (2009), the fact that ESP curriculum focuses on students’ needs, needs-responsive materials and teaching methods and needs-knowledgeable instructors will then be appropriate for English teaching in Thailand where the goal of students in compulsory education system is to become competent English communicators. It is advised that students in the secondary level who either work or continue their study after their education should be provided enough English for their work and study in an ASEAN context.

The shift of Thai English curriculum both in primary and secondary levels will mean an involvement of different parties ranging from young learners, specialists, curriculum designers, teachers, parents and university lecturers as ESP courses are mainly taught in tertiary level of education. However, the importance of Thai students able to place well in international testing and confidently compete with their counterparts in the ASEAN Community makes English curriculum reform necessary.

## **Conclusion**

From the first of January 2015 as decreed by the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the English language in Thailand should no longer be viewed as a foreign language. English will be employed in daily life activities, not only in language classroom. Presently, Thailand is still struggling with the strategic plans proposed by the Authority: an outdated English curriculum, a shortage of teachers, as well as low motivation of students. It is clear that Thailand English education requires further reform in order to be a successful ASEAN country member. Many actions need to be taken with a focus on Thai teacher professional development program and curriculum reform.

It is high time Thailand education plays its role effectively in order to help all Thai students in compulsory education to become well-equipped with English skills and reach their fullest potential in the ASEAN community. Although it may be complicated, English teaching and education reform should never be left untouched. In achieving success, all parties including students, parents, teachers, principals, the Ministry of Education, community, and business need to assist in making this mission possible in a timely manner.

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