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Thai Students' English Proficiency and the New World of AEC

ความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาไทยกับโลกใหม่แห่งประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน

- **พรพรรณ บุญพัฒนาภรณ์**
- อาจารย์ประจำสาขาภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจ
- คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยหอการค้าไทย
-
- **Pornpan Boonpattanaporn**
- Lecturer, Department of Business English
- School of Humanities
- University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce
- E-mail: pornpan__b@hotmail.com

บทคัดย่อ

การรวมตัวกันของประเทศต่าง ๆ เป็นประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนจะมีผลโดยสมบูรณ์ในปี พ.ศ. 2558 ในตอนนั้นอาเซียนจะรวมกันเป็นตลาดและฐานการผลิตเดียว มีการเคลื่อนย้ายสินค้า บริการ การลงทุน และแรงงานฝีมือมากขึ้น ทุกภาคส่วนของสังคมไทยจึงต้องเตรียมพร้อมเพื่อรองรับ การเปลี่ยนแปลงดังกล่าวอันจะมีผลต่อการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจชาติ อย่างไรก็ตาม การรับรู้และการเตรียมตัวเพื่อเข้าสู่ประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนอย่างสมบูรณ์ของประเทศไทยยังมีค่อนข้างน้อย การเคลื่อนย้ายของแรงงานฝีมืออย่างเสรีในภูมิภาคจะมีผลกระทบโดยตรงต่อบัณฑิตและแรงงาน ในประเทศไทย นอกเหนือจากทักษะในอาชีพแล้ว บัณฑิตและแรงงานยังต้องเตรียมตัวและพัฒนา ทักษะภาษาอังกฤษซึ่งเป็นภาษากลางที่ใช้ในประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน การค้าระหว่างประเทศ และการสื่อสารต่าง ๆ เพื่อเพิ่มความสามารถในการแข่งขันในตลาดแรงงานที่จะรุนแรงมากขึ้น ความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษของคนไทยนับเป็นปัญหาสำคัญที่มีการพูดถึงมาอย่างยาวนาน

การปรับเปลี่ยนการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษและการฝึกฝนตนเองของผู้เรียนให้มีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษเพิ่มมากขึ้นจึงเป็นสิ่งที่หลีกเลี่ยงไม่ได้ บทความนี้ได้วิเคราะห์ข้อจำกัดของการพัฒนาความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียนและเสนอข้อคิดเห็นเพื่อการปรับเปลี่ยนให้ผู้เรียนได้มีโอกาสมากขึ้นในการพัฒนาความสามารถทางภาษาสำหรับเตรียมรับการเปลี่ยนแปลงที่จะมาถึงในอีกสองสามปีข้างหน้า

คำสำคัญ: ประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน ความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาไทย การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ

Abstract

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will take full effect in 2015. At that time, the ASEAN region will become a single market and production base. It will open borders for freer mobility of goods, services, capital and skilled labour. All parties involved in Thailand need to prepare themselves for this change, which will affect the country's economic development. However, awareness of the impact and the country's preparation for the AEC are weak. The freer mobility of skilled labour in the region has a direct impact on job possibilities for Thais, since English is the working language in ASEAN and also the language of commerce. English skills need to be improved among the Thai graduate workforce in order to increase their competitiveness in the regional job market. English proficiency has always been a major problem in Thailand. Adjustments in learning-teaching English and learners' self-practice are necessary. This article presents limitations on current learning-teaching situations and also offers suggestions on adaptation in order to develop English proficiency to embrace the oncoming change.

Keywords: ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Thai Students' English Proficiency, English Language Learning-Teaching

Introduction

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is coming closer to realization. When AEC comes fully into effect in 2015, the ASEAN region will become a single market and production base with a free flow of goods, services, investment, capital and skilled labour throughout the region. According to the AEC Blueprint (ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, n.d.), the AEC will address cooperation in areas such as human resources development and capital building; recognition of professional qualifications; closer consultation on macroeconomic and financial policies; trade financing measures; enhanced infrastructure and communications connectivity; development of electronic transactions through e-ASEAN; integrating industries across the region to promote regional sourcing; and enhancing private sector involvement for developing AEC. This shows that AEC is not only about trade liberalization focusing on tariff reduction.

Integration with the AEC will make ASEAN more attractive, with a market larger than the EU in terms of population (SCB Economic Intelligence Center, 2011). Therefore, Thailand needs to prepare both human resources and all aspects of business in order to successfully participate in the AEC integration and be cooperative and competitive with the other member countries.

Thai businesses need to adapt to the new environment, make appropriate decisions and keep up with a fast changing situation. Alternatively, all kinds of businesses may lose market shares to other ASEAN countries.

AEC and Impacts upon New Graduates and the Thai Workforce

After the integration in the ASEAN Economic Community, businesses and graduates will face greater challenges as a result of a higher percentage of business ownership by ASEAN investors. Foreign investors will be able to increase their shareholding in ASEAN-based companies from 49% to 70% across the region. This could be a challenge to Thai companies as early as 2012. The four sectors earmarked for such liberalization beginning in 2010 include ICT, tourism, healthcare and aviation, followed by logistics in 2013 and other businesses in 2015. However, this free trade is already exerting a challenge, especially for local software companies due to tougher competition in terms of capital, costs, and workers' English language capability. (Bangkok Post Reporter, 2011)

The freer mobility of skilled professionals within the region will be another issue. One of the attempts to facilitate labour mobility within the AEC is to develop mutual recognition of professional accreditation in seven fields

namely engineering, nursing, architecture, surveying, medicine, dentistry and accountancy. Skilled professionals with language capabilities can move freely within the region. As a result, Thai graduates and all who work in Thailand will also face foreign candidates in the job market, especially in the hospitality sector. The effort to turn Thailand into a service oriented economy with the hospitality sector as the priority is high on the agenda of plans for national development (Saengpassa, 2010). Therefore, the workforce must be equipped with the knowledge and knowhow to improve their skills in order to tap new opportunities in these ASEAN markets.

Awareness of AEC

Changes arising from the AEC have been moving forward step by step for a few years, with completion set for 2015. However, there is not much evidence of Thailand's awareness and preparation for the integration. Concerns over Thailand's low awareness and slow pace of preparation for the AEC were expressed by the secretary-general of ASEAN, Surin Pitsuwan and Director of the Bureau of Asian Affairs, Thalerngsak Vongsamsorn (Khaopa, 2011b). Thai businesses are not well aware of the coming change, especially SMEs. A study by the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce revealed that 79.5% of SMEs surveyed had very little knowledge and understanding about AEC, and 40.6%

of SME operators were not ready for competition (Bangkok Post Reporter, 2010). Moreover, Education Minister Woravat Auapinyakul admitted that the Thai education system has not developed sufficiently to make the country competitive at the regional level or to prepare it for the launch of the AEC in 2015 (The Nation Reporter, 2011).

According to a survey in 2008, Thailand was ranked eighth among ten nations in terms of awareness about ASEAN (Saengpassa and Khaopa, 2010). Most of the information about AEC can be found in newspapers and various websites on the Internet, but not often on TV and other media. The awareness of AEC and its impacts on new graduates have not been widely discussed. How to adapt to AEC should be in the public eye, both on an individual and national scale. All SME operators want government agencies to step up public relations and disseminate more information on how they would benefit from AEC and how to prepare themselves to cope with stiffer competition (Bangkok Post Reporter, 2010). According to Cheewarattanaporn, acting president of Association of Thai Travel Agents, there is a lack of clear knowledge about AEC. Furthermore, language skills, compared with Singapore and the Philippines, will be another concern (Ngamsangchaikit, 2011). Thailand's competitiveness faced with AEC challenges

compared to Singapore's and Malaysia's was analyzed by using the ranking data from World Economic Forum (WEF). It showed that Singapore was ranked first in all over aspects of competitiveness followed by Malaysia and then Thailand (Kanitpongse, 2010: 71-92).

Since English is the working language of ASEAN, to overcome challenges they may encounter, Thai graduates and skilled workers in all professions need to be equipped with the English skills necessary for this new environment. Students going to graduate must have English communicative competence relevant to their prospective jobs. English is also the common language for international trade; therefore, English skills proficiency should be raised across all levels of the workplace if Thailand is to keep up with the economic growth and AEC integration.

The English Language Situation in Our Neighbouring Countries

Out of the ten member countries of ASEAN, Malaysia, The Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore use English as their official language. People in these countries have more opportunities to be exposed to the language. In the Philippines, the government allocates funds for remedial English-language instruction for teachers

and makes use of English as the medium of instruction (The Philippines and the English language: E for English, 2009), so English proficiency is important in that country and for each of its citizens. In Brunei, English has been an important language of education and a second language within the country (Poedjosoedarmo, 2004: 359-370). In Singapore, everyone speaks some English and uses it freely on a daily basis in social and economic situations. Fifty percent of school-aged children in Singapore speak English as their main language at home (Deterding, 2007: 4).

Regarding Vietnam, English has become popular and is used not only between Vietnamese and foreigners but also between Vietnamese and Vietnamese. Social demands have forged the reemergence of English as the language for broader communication and cooperation there. English is now a major tool paving the way for a better job both in the tourism and hospitality industries and in many other enterprises (Thin, 2006: 7-8).

In other countries, including Thailand, English is taught from primary school to university level as the first foreign language, but the opportunity to use it outside the classroom is limited because the mother tongue is used in all situations.

Do Thai Graduates have Sufficient English Language Proficiency to embrace the AEC?

Once the AEC is fully implemented, there will be more international companies and foreign executives and colleagues. Whether or not the Thai workforce and graduates will work in other countries or work with foreign companies in Thailand, it is necessary for them and those responsible to realize and raise awareness of the need to develop language capabilities. In the healthcare business, more and more foreigners are coming for health services in Thailand. In 2007, Thailand provided medical services for as many as 1.4 million foreign patients, compared to 500,000 in 2001 (Na Ranong & Na Ranong, 2011). As a result, some hospitals have already established a service to facilitate the process for foreign patients and clients. After the AEC, this reality is supposed to be applied to other businesses as well.

Communication in English or neighbouring country languages cannot be avoided. However, English is a typical problem challenging Thai graduates and workers as shown by the scores from International Standardized Tests. Among six Asian countries in 2005, the average TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) score of Thai test-takers ranked fourth at 524 out of 990, after the Philippines (751), Singapore (628),

and Cambodia (606) (The Nation Reporter, 2005)

Concern over low English proficiency was pointed out by Associate Professor Witaya Jeradechakul, director of Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Secretariat. He mentioned that Thai students' weak points were English language and a diligent attitude toward their studies (Khaopa, 2011c). That this low English proficiency problem has to be urgently solved in a practical way was agreed by Education Ministry's executives, academics, and private sector representatives (Khaopa, 2011a).

Facing the Fact

It is high time to face the fact that Thai graduates have low English proficiency. There are several factors contributing to this problem.

- Teacher-Centred Approach

Activities are crucial for language learning in class and in student-centred practices, but teachers often feel frustrated because some of their students continue to speak and write with relatively poor accuracy (Richards, Gallo & Renandya, n.d.). There are some limitations in using student-centred practices and a communicative approach in English classes in Thailand, since grammar is deeply rooted in teachers' beliefs as a core of language learning. Most teachers emphasize correcting student errors, which inhibits students'

confidence in using the language.

According to Foley (2005: 223-234), factors contributing to the limited success of English language teaching in Thailand are lack of proper curricula, a dry teaching style that excessively focuses on grammatical details, students, learning media, inappropriate texts, and testing and evaluation. Furthermore, teacher-centered activities and learning strategies such as memory skills are still widely used in language classes. In fact, teachers, text memorization and multiple-choice tests are still the main focus in most language learning teaching scenarios at all levels of education.

- National Exam Format

Since examination both at school and university level mostly does not test the productive skills of speaking and writing, Thai students learn grammar and reading in order to pass exams (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana & Chinnawongs, 2003). Speaking and writing skills are relegated to lower values. Most secondary students further their study at the tertiary level. Although they spend most of their upper secondary years tutoring major subjects, including English, in order to succeed in entrance examinations, now called 'admissions,' to a university of their choice, the average score of Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) of Thai students after finishing Matayom 6 was not at

a satisfactory level. The average score of English for the academic year 2010 announced by The National Institute of Educational Testing Service was 19.22%, compared to 23.98% in 2009, 30.68 in 2008 and 30.93 in 2007 (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2011). The English Admissions Exam still mainly focuses on grammar, vocabulary and reading skills on which the instruction in English classes has been accordingly concentrated. This pattern of entrance exams, which continue to focus on reproduction of subject matter, has influenced teacher-centred practices (Noytim, 2006: 15).

- Limited Environment for Practising English

In general, students lack opportunity to use English in daily life. Attending an international school or a bilingual programme is unaffordable for most students. Their opportunity to practise English is limited to only a few hours of English classes per week if a student-centred approach is employed, although in some tourist towns like Chiang Mai or Phuket, their opportunities are wider. Nevertheless, most of them do not take advantage of the opportunity. This might be because of their shyness, and lack of confidence. Moreover, there is not much incentive or requirement for them to do so. Not many activities are assigned to students to practise their English with foreigners

outside the classroom. Students reported that they had difficulties in using English as it is too challenging for them to be competent because they lack opportunities to use English in their daily life (Wiryachitra, 2002).

- **Students' Lack of Confidence**

Students' lack of confidence can hinder their increase in language competence. Many students have low confidence in their ability to speak without prior planning. Students feel uneasy to speak because of their anxiety to speak well and error treatment techniques by some teachers (Liu & Littlewood 1997). This is also the case for Thai students. Most students expressed their desire to speak and their problem of lacking confidence to do so (Songsiri, 2007: 2). Rongsa-ard (2002) found that students evaluated their speaking competence as low, and they felt worried and stressed with communication situations in class. This shows that they lack confidence in using their speaking competence. As a result, group activities or role-plays in which students practise and develop language functions are sometimes not successful. Their lack of confidence leads to the failure of genuine interaction in the language class.

- **Students' Attitude towards Studying English**

Students start to study English in primary school as a compulsory subject without realizing its necessity and importance,

so there is no motivation to practise. In addition, the English language system is very different from Thai so students study by rote learning. That can cause a negative attitude towards studying English. Most language teachers affirmed that their students' learning potential increased when attitudes were positive and motivation was high (Elyildirim and Ashton, 2006: 2). Attitude is important. Stern (1983: 386) identified the value of a positive attitude towards language learning and not only that learners with a positive attitude learn more, but also learners who learn well acquire positive attitudes.

- **Learning Strategies**

Students are used to a teacher-centred approach where teachers are the providers of knowledge. Students are supposed to listen and take notes. The skill to acquire knowledge outside the classroom is not planted in their learning behaviour. Some students are assigned to search for information on the internet, but they mostly search for information in Thai. Therefore, a student-centred approach is not easy to apply, and both teachers and students have to adjust themselves to achieve the goal.

All difficulties mentioned above are related to all parties involved in the English teaching and learning process. It can be assumed that the main cause that lies behind these difficulties is the coordination of all

elements in the process to function efficiently. However, these are difficulties that can be overcome if they are seriously and carefully taken care of. Equipping students with effective English skills is the goal that no one can overlook and ignore.

Some Practical Suggestions

- Boosting Confidence

One of the main factors promoting students' confidence in language learning is increasing a favourable self-conception of the target language competence. Students claimed that they had limited vocabulary and grammar; as a result, they had difficulties in communication in an unforeseen situation. The use of mother tongue language (L1) should be allowed if necessary. As Shin (2006: 6) mentioned, 'If it is more efficient to use L1 for a difficult expression or word, just use it.' Moreover, Kim & Petraki (2009: 58) conducted research and found that L1 plays a supportive role in the language classroom, and more significantly in reading and writing. Tang (2002: 41) reported that 91% of surveyed Beijing University students claim to have benefited from the use of L1 in class. He also showed that limited use of L1 in English class does not reduce students' exposure to English, but rather can assist in the teaching and learning processes. When students feel that they can manage to get

through to the audience, their confidence in speaking will increase. One way to increase confidence is to employ small group activities as they can participate in discussion with less anxiety and with support from their classmates. Moreover, the atmosphere in class also affects students' performance. Students prefer a relaxed atmosphere and group work as well as teachers who are friendly and supportive. Correcting students' speaking errors all the time can destroy the atmosphere in class. Teachers may take notes of the errors found and explain later. At the same time, making students realize the necessity of being competent in English and how this will affect their future career can encourage them to practise more, which leads to increasing their self confidence and a better perception of themselves.

- Teacher Training

In the 2009 Educational Reform, teacher development focused on the provision of in-service training, targeting Thailand's teacher training institutes as well as pre-service training for the next generation of teachers in Thai educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2009). An appropriate method of workshop training and all facilities for teachers to employ communicative language teaching in class should be provided. Teachers should be encouraged to attend seminars and workshops so that they can learn new

techniques, share information and refresh their ideas. Workable activities to promote relaxed and supportive atmosphere should be offered in order that teachers can easily choose and adjust them to be relevant to their students, environment and situation. Furthermore, an online teachers' forum should be set up so that teachers who have students with comparable limitations can discuss both practical teaching techniques and solutions to problems regarding in-class teaching and outside-class activities.

- Websites

Since AEC is approaching rapidly, and competition in the job market will be tougher, students need to improve their English proficiency to meet the demand of employers in relation to their fields. In this Wi-Fi era, students are keen on surfing the Net, so they can find the various websites for practising English. Thailand Cyber University is one of the sources which provides various kinds of courses, including English. This responds to The National Scheme of Education (2002-2016), which states that all people will be able to utilize the technologies for continuously increasing knowledge and learning for the benefit of their careers and their daily life. However, knowledge of the existence of this e-learning website by the Commission of Higher Education is unfortunately not so widespread. Only 146,829 people have

registered as members of the website as of November 2011. Among these members, 142,553 are students and 4,276 are teachers (Thailand Cyber University, 2011).

In order to make the best use of the numerous available websites, students need to be autonomous learners because they have a variety of choices to learn from and develop themselves at their own pace. However, Thai students' lack of responsibility for their own learning is one of the problems (Wiriyaichitra, 2002). Teachers can assist them by integrating controlled self-practice activities into their courses so that students have opportunities to practise studying on their own. After they have achieved some set stages, and learned to be responsible for their own progress, they can practise freely. It is necessary for teachers to have sufficient IT knowledge and skills to direct their students to appropriate sources. Since language proficiency is accumulative, they should also practise continuously. The problem is that progress is difficult to measure, and is mainly observed by others; therefore, some students might give up along the way. Teachers should offer them some orientation about the slow progress of language improvement as language skills are accumulated over time.

- Internship as a Real Life Communication Practice

Apart from improving language skills,

internships can also provide opportunities for students to work and interact with experienced staff in their field of study. Moreover, if there are foreign staff in the workplace, students will have better chances to learn intercultural communication. As a result, cultural awareness will also be implanted in their concern. Internships should be required and widely implemented in all fields of study because working skills, together with effective communication skills, will be useful and of practical use in the AEC job market.

- Exit Exam

To certify that Thai graduates have sufficient English proficiency, approved criteria are needed for new graduates. English exit exams can be one option. The exit exam can certify that Thai graduates are capable of communicating and using English in their job. In 2002, the Ministry of Education initiated a reform of English curriculum and teaching-learning in Thai universities. The exit test, which aims to ensure the quality of English language teaching and learning, was one of the policies. However, it is obvious that this policy has not been seriously applied nationally. It would be ideal if this English exit exam could be professional English related to their field of study. Students who cannot pass the exam could take courses to refresh their English skills. There are

International Standardized English Tests, such as TOEIC, but the exit exam can be adjusted to be more relevant to their field of study and prospective jobs. A national exit exam would spur students to achieve, and the result could be used as a guarantee of their capability.

- English as a Second Language

In October 2010, The Ministry of Education planned to declare English the second language of teaching and learning in schools with the hope that this would encourage students to achieve proficiency in English and help place Thailand on the road to be competitive in the AEC integration. Later, the plan was called off with the reason that it could lead to misunderstandings that Thailand had been colonized in the past (Bunnag, 2010). English is now a global language and it is the main language of commerce and communication. Thai businesses have to use English as a medium of conducting business worldwide, especially when AEC is fully in effect. Furthermore, millions of tourists come to Thailand every year. Competence in English by the Thai workforce benefits not only business sectors but also the country as a whole. Benefits from English capability and the notion of the country having been colonized are different matters. That Thailand has never been colonized is a hard fact. The notion of colonization should not

deprive the country and citizens as a whole of the benefits of English language competency. A part of the Thai economy is based on the tourism and hospitality business, and when AEC takes full effect, more foreigners can be expected in Thailand. This means that not only working people in related businesses need to have English language skills, at least at a level to get the job done, but also Thai people in general need to have English for communicating business in everyday life. Is it not high time to regard English as a second language?

In order to keep pace with the ever changing world and to participate successfully in AEC, changes need to be done at all levels of education to make the whole system work in harmony and move towards the same goal.

All in all, what we need to do, we need to do fast, otherwise we will miss the last train for AEC integration. Time and tide wait for no man.

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Ms. Pornpan Boonpattanaporn received her Master of Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Chulalongkorn University. She is currently a full-time instructor in the Department of Business English, the School of Humanities, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce. Her main interests include Business English and writing pedagogy.