Bilingual Education in Thailand

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1. Forward

In this report I aim to provide a broad overview of the current situation of bi-lingual education in Thailand. I have taken a particular interest in the teaching of STEM subjects, which is currently an issue of debate in the bi-lingual education world and an area of personal interest following a year working in a bilingual high school in Madrid, as a British Council Language Assistant.

This report does not try to propose new hypothesis in relation to bi-lingual education, more than anything due to a lack of time. However, I hope to have highlighted some of the key issues that currently exist within Thai bi-lingual education and offer some opinions on strengths and areas, which can be improved. Moreover, I have taken the time to conduct classroom observation and meet with stakeholders in Thailand who can add some colour to what we learn from secondary sources. I would like to especially thank those who met with me, often taking time out of busy schedules, and helped the report to become a reality.

The report would not have been possible without the generous funding from the Royal Thai Embassy in London, to whom I am immensely grateful. Not only has this provided an excellent opportunity to develop my personal interest in bi-lingual education, it has also been the basis for a wonderful insight into Thailand that I wouldn’t have otherwise been able to have.
2. Methodology

2.1 Background

The report did not aim to prove or disprove a particular hypothesis related to the teaching of Bilingual Education in Thailand. Rather, its purpose was to collate current knowledge on bilingual education programmes in Thailand and explore these issues further through first hand experiences on the ground. The primary research fell into two categories: interviews with educational professionals and classroom observations.

2.2 Limitations

Due to practicalities and time constraints, the report was almost wholly Bangkok centric and all the professionals and the school visited were based there. It is noteworthy that respondents with knowledge of the wider Thai educational system highlighted that the quality of provision differed significantly between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that the report is representative of the bilingual education system in Thailand as a whole.

Another area that this report did not look and would have been of great interest was the equity of provision between socio-economic groups. My only observation on this area was that the majority of English Programme schools charge fees above the norm, which is likely to cause significant disparities in access to the education provided. I think that equitable provision, or potential lack of it, is a significant issue, which warrants further investigation.

2.2 Literature Review

A literature review was conducted for the purposes of the report and made use of newspaper articles, peer reviewed journals, and academic literature and education provider produced literature. One weakness was my inability to read Thai, which meant only work that was written in English or had been translated was considered in the writing of the report.

2.3 Classroom Observation

As part of my research, I spent a day in Chatwittaya School, which is one of the older bi-lingual schools in Bangkok. I worked with a number of bilingual classes for children aged 7-11, in doing so I both observed classes as well as imparted them. I have around one and a half years English as a foreign language teaching experience both in Europe and Latin America, the majority of which was working with the British Council. This experience allowed me to gain an understanding of the level of the children’s English, with reference to the EU Common Framework for Languages.

In addition to my direct work with students, I was also given an opportunity to look through their written work and to review the textbooks that they used in classes.
2.4 Interviews

Interviews took place either over the phone or by email. The interviews took place at both the beginning and the end of the project in order to narrow down areas of observation for the classroom and afterwards to better appreciate what had been seen over the course of the programme.
3. English in Thailand: The Current Situation

3.1 Importance of English

The importance of English in Thailand is undoubted, by way of illustration in 2015 Thailand will be forming part of the new ASEAN single market. This move will make English language even more imperative both for companies wishing to invest in their neighbours and skilled workers seeking employment within other members of the alliance. In recognition of the vital importance of English this year the Ministry of Education has allocated over 500 million baht to improve the English of students (Chongkittavorn, 2014, p1).

3.2 English Proficiency

Given the context of regional integration based upon English as the common language, the current proficiency levels in Thailand are worryingly low. In the EF Proficiency Test, Thailand has the second worst English speaking ability within the region (see fig 1). However, more positively, the overall trend is the trend for improvement within Thailand, from the first report published in 2007 to the current report in 2012, Thailand has improved by 5.03. Whilst in comparison with stellar improving neighbours such as Vietnam (+7.95) or Indonesia (+8.66) this may not be as good as hoped looked at globally it represents a very good result. For example, in other emerging regions the top performer in Latin America, Peru, increased by 5.25, followed by Colombia 4.30. Likewise, in the Middle East and North Africa the top performer, UAE, which only managed a 4.84 increase (Education First [EF], 2012, para 1).

Whilst the Education First study has the largest sample size of any research into English proficiency by a wide margin, over 1.7 million respondents, one significant weakness is that it is not statistically controlled. Moreover, as the test is carried out on the Internet it may not reach rural poor who do not have Internet access which can artificially inflate performance. This is of particular relevance in Thailand, where in 2012 only 25.8% of the population were Internet users (Open Net, 2012, para 3). However, that said similar studies, which are controlled, such as those by the British Council, tend to gain similar results to and the report is useful in highlighting the trends within English education (Greene, 2012, p1).
3.3 Public Provision of English Teaching in Thailand

Thailand has been investing very heavily in education in recent years, investing 31.5\% of its government budget in 2012 (the last year for which data is available). This makes Thailand the highest spender on education in the world in percentage terms. (World Bank, 2012)

![Fig.3 Spending on education as a percentage of total government budget for Thailand (World Bank, 2012)]

3.4 Private provision of English Teaching in Thailand

Visiting Thailand you cannot help but be surprised by the colossal number of private institutions offering extra tuition within Thailand. This is reflective of the substantial amount of private investment many Thais make in their own and their children’s education. In a recent study by the National Children and Family Development Institute it was found that the average student has 25000-35000bt spent on them by their parents, effectively doubling the 35,000bt spending by the government. A large portion of this undoubtedly will go on English tuition (MCOT, 2014).
4. Areas of Investigation

4.1 Teacher Training

A consistent theme amongst those I spoke to was that the quality of teacher training was an area where significant improvement could be made.

The most significant criticism was the lack of connection between the academic training future teachers receive and the classroom itself. It is undoubtedly clear, that initial teacher training is key in the production of effective teachers, Wilson, Floden & Ferrini-Mundy (2003) reviewed 57 empirical reports in the US which found a positive correlation between teachers’ preparation and the performance of their students. However, respondents considered that Thai teacher training schools tend not to incorporate significant elements of classroom observation and teacher practice. An exception to this are the majority of public universities which have connected schools, know as demonstration schools, which enable students to gain practice. These schools are widely recognised as offering a high quality education to pupils and are relatively selective. One interviewee highlighted the Chulalongkorn University Demonstration School as being a particularly successful example. Given their popularity with parents these schools should be expanded to give students training to be teachers sufficient opportunity to practice before entering the classroom, particularly within the private university sector (where only two teacher training colleges have demonstration schools).

The impact of this disconnect is compounded by a tendency for teacher training colleges to have not properly considered the needs of schools themselves, which can differ substantially across the urban-rural divide. This issue is highlighted by Dr Jutarat Vibulphol, Deputy Dean of Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Educational Technology at Chulalongkorn University’s Education Faculty, who at a recent conference asked ‘Have the teacher-training colleges ever asked schools and communities what kind of teachers they want? Should the top-down approach be phased out so colleges that train teachers spend more time thinking about the existing needs of schools and the communities in which they are located? Are the teacher-training colleges confident their students can meet the standards needed for teachers within the profession?’ (Saengpassa, 2014, 1). Dr Jutarat Vibulphol is undoubtedly right to ask these questions and resolving the current disconnect between the training needed and the training provided will clearly boost standards. However, I would go further and ask what kind of teachers the students need, rather than solely the schools. For example, it was commonly reported that there can often be a significant difference between written ability and speaking ability, which can only be addressed by giving Thai teachers the skill set to confidently communicate orally in English.

In addition to properly catering for teachers needs one respondent, who was a journalist working in the education sector, highlighted that the current systems in place were too rigid and did not recognise that different teachers needed different training and that one size did not fit all. Moreover, there has been a tendency for training to be focussed on short-term courses rather than in more
holistic longer-term approach. This is especially important in the sphere of English teaching where the language skills of teachers require a significant amount of time to develop. One respondent described how they were tasked with training a group of primary schools teachers who had only a rudimentary level to reach a classroom ready standard over the course summer – undoubtedly an impossible goal.

4.2 Teacher Recruitment

Respondents noted that the ideal teacher in a bi-lingual environment should be bi-lingual themselves speak both Thai and English, or at least have a good understanding of Thai. This corroborates with research by George M. Blanco who states, ‘the bilingual education teacher should have more than a passing acquaintance with the target language’ (1977). The reality is that this looks highly difficult to achieve in the near future, the vast majority of teachers from developed countries where English is a first language tend to come to work in Thailand for a relatively short period of time and therefore do not develop significant Thai skills. Those who do choose to stay for substantial periods of time, generally end up working for international schools, where they work as normal English speaking teachers rather than bi-lingual teachers. Filipino teachers are an exception to this as they can earn more in Thailand than in their native countries, ‘she said they pay more and the standard of living is cheaper’ (Frederiksen, C, 2014). However, interestingly all the Filipino teachers I spoke to said that wages increased significantly in Thailand recently and this was discouraging friends from moving to Thailand to teach.

If Thailand is to have a substantial number of truly bi-lingual teachers this is likely to be the sources is likely to be Thailand or, of course, significantly increasing the level of Thai teacher’s English. Both look quite difficult to attain, in the first case due to the desired teacher profile (discussed in 4.3) and in the second case because of the length of time needed to improve language skills.

4.3 Teacher Profile

From discussions with respondents, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a bias from parents for native speaker tuition. Sadly, this also includes a bias for teachers from Western Countries. It is worth noting that native teachers are not necessarily substantially better if at all than non-native teachers. This is particularly important in a country such as Thailand where the differential between a native teacher’s salary and an overseas teacher’s salary is substantial, which may in fact be a questionable use of resources. The ‘native teacher’ fallacy is summed up well by Braine ‘Does the fact that one displays good pronunciation and correct grammar (these value-ridden notions will themselves be challenged) make one a successful teacher of language? Language teaching is an art, a science, and a skill that requires complex pedagogical preparation and practice. Therefore, not all speakers may make good teachers of their first language. On the other hand, it is possible to make a case that speakers with multi-lingual competence, even in a situation where the language is a foreign or second language, may make successful language teachers. Their proficiency is more than
one language system develops a deep metalinguistic knowledge and complex language awareness.’ (Braine, 1991: 80).

### 4.4 Teacher Retention

Teacher retention was seen as a complicated area for schools, particularly for western native language speakers. One Director complained that they were fixated with the salaries received and viewed teaching as very temporary, this often meant they were not willing to invest as much time in really getting to know and caring for the students. Moreover, schools competed very hard for western teachers and she cited many instances when western native teachers left her school with a few days notice for higher paying positions or opportunities at home. This is clearly highly detrimental for student’s development.

I would suggest that a big contributing factor is that all EP schools independently recruit from a limited pool of teachers, making competition between them fierce. The Thai government could act as a useful middleman if it were to act as a recruiter for native language teachers or assistants for EP schools. This would stop the intense competition between schools and enable their role to be connected with visa entitlements, encouraging them to say for the longer term. There are many case studies for these programs such as the foreign language assistant programme in Spain, EPIK in Korea and JET in Japan. Having centrally co-ordinated programmes also allows for a more uniform training provision to be made which will enhance both the experience of students and teachers. Moreover, the economies of scale provided in efforts to advertise and attract applicants to position may lead to better quality teachers being selected. Additionally, I am convinced that there would be high demand for such a programme, as a result of the large number of applications for the shorter British Council programme which recruits language assistant for the summer period.

### 4.5 Teaching of STEM Subjects in English

The original aim of the report was to look specifically at the issue of teaching STEM subjects in a second language and the problems and benefits that came with this. The respondents that I spoke were almost all extremely positive about teaching STEM subjects in English. One School Director pointed out that parents were keen that there students were taught by a ‘western’ science teacher, perhaps not only due to the subject matter being in English but also due to a perceived, but not necessarily true, better standard of science teaching in the west. A science teacher I interviewed also highlighted that generally there were no barriers to the students learning as a result of studying in English and extolled the benefit of learning science in English as this was the medium of communication internationally in the subject.

Although the respondents were highly positive about studying STEM subjects in English, the jury is not yet out on this issue. For example, in a study into teaching
science in English in Malaysia respondents commented that, 'students do not understand well. Teachers cannot explain well in English but explain well in their mother tongue' and 'the foundation of English language for students and teachers is not good. Some teachers are good in English but students can't understand them' (Hudson, 2009:168). My significant concern from classroom observation is that whilst many students were ready to benefit from learning Science in English there were also students whose level was of a standard, which would have been too low to easily grasp complex subjects in English. Peter Hudson argues that it is vitally important to build up a strong base in scientific English at a primary school level (Hudson, 2009:170). This is undoubtedly true and I am concerned that for those students who do not have this solid base in scientific English the choice of then studying science in English through secondary school may present a significant cost to their learning.
5. Conclusion

When concluding the report what is undoubtedly clear is the importance of English in Thailand, that Thailand to a great extent has recognised this and great efforts are being made to meet the challenge that this recognition poses. The challenges that Thailand faces are found in the detail and implementation of bilingual teaching. I think the two greatest challenges that Thailand currently faces with its provision are the effective recruitment of native speakers and a shift to a more long-term training approach for Thai teachers. I believe that a move to a system similar to South Korea or Japan could reap significant dividends in tackling the issue of recruiting native teachers. The evidence of the popularity of British Summer Teaching programme suggests that there could be good demand for such a programme and the school that hosted participants commented on the benefit it gave to students. Unfortunately, the second stumbling block of training for current teachers is a harder one to tackle. In reality for a more long term approach to be taken a greater deal of political stability is most likely needed and this will take change in the Thai political system as a whole or perhaps a greater isolation of the institutions in charge of English language policy from political influence, which would, unfortunately, be hard to achieve given the political interest in English education.
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