

Changes in Curriculum in a Graduate Program for ESP Teachers : The Situation at Mahidol University

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The graduate program at Mahidol University in Applied Linguistics : English for Specific Purposes (in the Department of Foreign Languages) is geared toward preparing its students to become, or to become better, teachers and researchers in ESP. As with graduate programs all over the world, the curriculum at Mahidol has evolved and is still evolving due to changing conditions, concepts and clientele. This paper first describes the program that existed in 1985, then examines its strengths and weaknesses, and finally notes the major developments and continuing concerns in 1986.

The program is seen as having a small core of high quality teachers and students and a solid placement record for past graduates. At the same time, there have been problems related to the lack of a clear focus, too much theory at the expense of practical matters, and lack of guidelines for all concerned on thesis work. Developments in 1986 include a sharpening of the program's focus, changes in the courses offered (both core and elective) to fit with the new focus, and plans for new guidelines for thesis work.

In 1976, Mahidol University began offering a Master's program in Applied Linguistics (English for Specific Purposes) with a focus on science and technology. The program planners attempted to go beyond the traditional types of curriculum offered in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics by focusing on the needs of language learners in specific fields of endeavor. Given Mahidol's status as a scientifically and medically oriented institution, the specific fields generally meant science and medicine.

The program has undergone various changes since its pioneering beginning and, as with any vital graduate program, continues to change and hopefully progress in the effort to improve the effectiveness of language teaching and research in Thailand. This paper describes the program that existed in 1985, the changes that are taking place in 1986, and the concerns that are felt as the program evolves.

The Program in 1985

The program objectives in 1985, as stated in the program of studies, were to "produce teachers in the field of English for Specific Purposes capable of providing effective language instruction to students specializing in specific scientific or technological fields ; to broaden the scope of ESP study and research and to produce findings which will make a positive contribution to our knowledge of teaching and learning English for specific purposes."

The size of the program was small, with 6-10 new students annually. Teachers came both from within Mahidol's Department of Foreign Languages (Faculty of Science) and from other universities in Thailand, including Chulalongkorn, Prince of Songkla, etc.

The length of the program was two years, basically three semesters of coursework and one semester allotted for thesis completion. In 1985, a two-week pre-session course was set up for first year graduate students in order to better acclimate them to the graduate school environment and to involve them in a sampling of progressive language learning activities.

The content of the program included 9 compulsory courses, 8 for credit and 1 non-credit (General Linguistics, General Methodology in Language Teaching, Aspects of English for Specific Purposes, Developing and Evaluating Materials for ESP, Writing for Academic Purposes, Pedagogical Grammar, Testing, Statistics and Research Methodology, and Background in English Grammar and in Science/Technology). In addition, 20 elective courses were listed in the program of studies, though about a third had never been offered and several others were just offered once or twice.

1985 Program Evaluation

In the second half of 1985, an evaluation was carried out within the department in order to improve the program. On the basis of that evaluation, as well as the natural processes of evolution, the Graduate Program Committee has continued to adapt the program to fit changing circumstances.

Strengths of the Program

When trying to improve any program, change is the key and, as such, it becomes easy to see only the weaknesses. However, it is important to look at the strengths as well, not only as a caution against cynicism but also as a way

of seeing how improvements can best be put into the system. Some of the strengths of Mahidol's M.A. program seem to include :

1. A small core of dedicated and professional teacher educators.
2. A good reputation among language program administrators.
3. A core of high quality graduate students, past and present.

Dedicated educators represent a key element in any program, yet many programs suffer without the guiding lights of people with vision, talent, and persistence. Mahidol has had and continues to have a small but solid core, composed of several Mahidol faculty members and a couple of visiting professors of distinction from other universities. Problems do exist, of course, but this core helps to buffer any setbacks and strives to push on toward excellence.

A reputation can be a vague concept. In Mahidol's case, its reputation seems strong among those administrators who hire teachers at various colleges and universities. They have been very responsive to hiring our graduates. At the same time, one of the frustrations that some of our graduate students face is that many, many people in TEFL in Thailand are completely unaware of the program.

Reputations of programs generally come from those teaching in them and those who graduate from them and then go on to success. Mahidol has several faculty members who have been quite active in a variety of teaching and research activities and professional organizations. In terms of teaching, current faculty members have had a wide variety of experiences in teaching English for specific subject areas, e.g. science, medicine, and business, different levels, e.g. primary, secondary, tertiary, and adult, and countries, e.g. U.S., Japan, Nigeria, and, of course, Thailand. Along with having various books published in Thailand and internationally, members of the faculty have had articles published, or soon to be published, in such international journals as *English Teaching Forum*, *RELC Journal*, and *Cross Currents* in addition to many others in Thailand and abroad. Members of the faculty also have had links with Thai TESOL and International TESOL, organizations committed to the advancement of our profession.

Reputation also derives from the success of past graduates and Mahidol has been fortunate to have had some high quality students in the last decade. The rigorous selection process helps to ensure a solid core of high quality people, with applications ranging from 75-85 a year compared to selection of 6-10 per year, or around 10%. Many graduates from the program are now in positions of responsibility at good universities, e.g. Chulalongkorn, GIBA, Chiang Mai, KMIT, etc.

All such strengths, of course, relate to the people rather than the program or curriculum. Good people can learn from a weak program while weak people may end up lost no matter how good the program is. Mahidol has been and remains fortunate to have some good people as teachers and as students.

Weaknesses

Despite the pretty picture just pointed, the program has had some real weaknesses as well. Given the normal and natural constraints that most such programs face, there will always be weaknesses ; the best we can hope for is to reduce the impact of some of the major ones at present while staving off new ones in the future. A brief listing of areas of current concern includes :

1. Program geared toward theory more than practice.
2. Lack of guidelines for teachers and students about thesis work.
3. Lack of a clear and consistent focus (or weakness in communicating that focus to potential students)

The balance between theory and practice is always precarious. Too much practice without theory can leave students happy in the short term but lost in the long term while emphasis on theory can leave students with a great deal of knowledge but lacking in skills to apply that knowledge to the real world. The program at Mahidol has always had a strong theoretical element, but has not concentrated as much on some of the practical elements of teaching foreign languages as it could.

Working on an independent thesis is something very alien to many graduate students all over the world. The style of approaching the work seems totally different from normal courses where the teacher tells the students what to do and the students then do it. It is common for graduate students anywhere to complain about their courses and teachers and celebrate the end of coursework and then face the crunch of having to do research on their own to finish the requirements of the degree. As such, it is not surprising that this work creates problems for Mahidol's students. For the program planners, however, the problems go further. There has not been a systematic set of guidelines either for the students or for faculty who have worked with students. From informal conversations with faculty connected with other graduate programs in Thailand, this seems to be the norm rather than the exception here.

Lack of focus is also a problem of many programs throughout the world. The goals and objectives of any program need to be clear in the minds of everyone involved, but it is all too easy to drift along assuming that the goals are clear when they are not. In Mahidol's case, the goals have been very general and have not been understood in the same way by the various people involved. Put another way, Mahidol has had a lack of systematic integration, i.e. the program remains vulnerable to the whims and fancies of individual teachers, each of whom may desire to take a different path. On the one hand, too much integration can strangle the vitality of a program; on the other hand, lack of integration of some

sort can work to dissolve some of the benefits of it. As most people in university life are aware, 'tenured' faculty, rival power factions, and differing educational philosophies make efforts at integrating programs a delicate and complicated task.

Related to having a clear focus is the matter of communicating that focus to prospective graduate students. Though the program of studies has made clear that the program is geared toward language teachers, a few graduate students have entered the program with no such interest and have been surprised to learn that their courses are designed for teachers. Apparently, some interpret "Applied Linguistics : Teaching English for Specific Purposes" to mean that the program is designed to teach English for the students' own specific purposes. In addition, some have seen the large number of courses listed and have imagined that they could take any courses they chose to in that list and ignore those dealing with education. Such misunderstanding is unfortunate and may reflect the naiveté or lack of thinking of the part of certain graduate students, but it remains a key task for faculty to make sure students know exactly what the program is about before they enter it.

Developments in 1986

Program Focus. One of the first things the Graduate Program Committee did after the evaluation was to consider the central purpose or focus of the program. Because the focus was seen in differing ways by various people, a clarification seemed in order. Among the options discussed were 1) to focus more on EST, 2) to focus more generally on ESP, 3) to focus on applied linguistics with a little ESP/EST.

The consensus was to focus on the teaching and research of ESP, a move which has opened up possibilities for changing present courses, opening new ones, and dropping others from the program. The decision stemmed from a desire to move toward a more practical and relevant focus to meet the needs of university, commercial college, and vocational college teachers and researchers. As such, the program is moving toward more emphasis on *applied* rather than theoretical linguistics and a broader focus for teachers of ESP and not only EST. With that shift, other actions have naturally followed.

Core Courses. One action taken this year has been to re-evaluate the program in light of the adjusted focus. This has included a thorough examination of the core courses that all students must take as well as those courses offered as electives. In light of the re-evaluation, the Graduate Program Committee decided to make the course "Practicum in Teaching" core (compulsory) since teaching is a prime element in the focus yet has not been included systematically in the program.

Elective Courses. As with many such decisions, to get something you must give up something ; in this case, the committee needed to decide what effect the new core course would have on the program. Adding another core course made it necessary to either reduce the number of electives by one, increase the number of credits needed to graduate, or change another core course into an elective. The committee, after ranking the importance of the various courses, decided to make Pedagogical Grammar an elective course.

With 20 possible electives listed in a small program, another priority seemed to be to rank the electives and then separate the ones that should be offered regularly, i.e. so that every student could have the chance to take them, from those which could be offered whenever there was substantial student interest. In addition, given a clearer program focus and objectives, some courses could perhaps be dropped entirely.

What has happened is that four courses from the past program have been listed as "regular electives" and will be offered once in every two year cycle. Those courses include Oral Expression, Audio-Visual Materials and Methodology, Pedagogical Grammar, and Psychology of Language Learning. In addition, Teaching Reading in a Foreign Language has been added as a new elective since reading seems to be the skill most needed in English for academic purposes in Thailand.

Other courses, e.g. Special Topics in Applied Linguistics (Communicative Language Teaching), Seminar in Teaching English for Specific Purposes, Translation, Curriculum Development, etc. are listed as 'occasional electives.' First year graduate students are checked on their interest in such courses and, where feasible, the 2-3 courses most desired by any one class will be offered in their program.

Several courses have been dropped from the program, e.g. Phonetics and Phonology, Morphology and Syntax, etc. Valuable as those courses might be to someone in Linguistics, they do not seem to fit into the focus of teaching and research of English for Specific Purposes, especially when there are other more immediately relevant courses for students to take. (See Figure 1 for a full course listing and Figure 2 for a sample sequence of courses.)

The present course structure seems to be an improvement, but more changes will probably need to be made in the future as the committee continues its search for 'the perfect program.'

The Thesis. The idea of having graduate students in language teaching conduct research and write theses seems reasonable. The experience, though agonizing and challenging, can be a very rewarding one in which the students cease being students and begin being professionals. The easy answers of the classroom give way to the tough realities of analyzing what's going on in the real world of language

learning and teaching. However, handling theses present many different problems to teachers and coordinators.

At Mahidol, we are presently attempting to come to grips with the problems of 1) lack of in-depth communication between advisors and students, 2) lack of communication between advisors, co-advisors, and proofreaders, 3) lack of consensus among teachers on what makes up an acceptable thesis, 4) plagiarism, and 5) lack of systematic guidelines for everyone concerned.

Lack of in-depth communication between advisors and students has been a problem because it has resulted in some theses that are not very well thought out. Thesis defense committees sometimes catch the inadequacies and force students to tighten up the research so that it becomes acceptable. However, such actions are not pleasant and can generally be avoided with closer communication throughout thesis projects. The Thai notion of "grengchai," very common among graduate students, needs to be overcome for this to be more successful. Lack of communication between advisors and other faculty members involved is also a problem because third party communication tends to be distorted and may damage trust between colleagues.

The question, "What is an acceptable thesis?" seems to have no easy answer. Some people want each thesis to contribute substantially in practical ways to the field of ESP while others are content with giving graduate students a chance to practice research without too much concern for its usefulness to the field. A quick look at theses that have been done at various universities can illustrate that quite well. Our struggle to reach some sort of consensus will surely be an ongoing one.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is an old expression; change "beauty" to "problem" and the expression seems to fit the situation of plagiarism. By American academic standards, the amount of plagiarism that exists all over Thailand is scandalous, but to many Thai graduate students and some of their advisors, the concept of plagiarism is either not clear or is not considered important. At Mahidol, a move is in progress to stamp it out and hopefully, in the process, raise the standards of professionalism to an international level. Whether our efforts are successful or not will take years to determine.

The keys to solving these problems are not always as easy to handle in reality as they are on paper. Nevertheless, we are presently preparing a set of guidelines for everyone involved so that the thesis process may become more productive and less unpleasant. With guidelines and the guidance of key people to make them work, we hope to make the challenging task of dealing with theses more comfortable for all concerned.

Integration of effort. Guidelines for various work related to the thesis can help to integrate one part of the program. At the same time, the course content and the patterns of interaction within the classroom remain, within limits, the responsibility of each teacher. As such, discrepancies between broad goals and individual efforts are bound to occur. To help in reducing the discrepancies, the Graduate Program committee encourages graduate students to anonymously evaluate the courses they take each semester. That system is being reinforced at present. In addition, informal sessions are held with students from time to time to get feedback that might help in improving weak parts of the program.

A related effort toward integrating the program centers around a curriculum file for the graduate program. The file is presently being established to provide a basic structure for the sharing of information between teachers and as a possible base for any future efforts to tie together various parts of the program. Without the file, finding out what is actually going on in each course is a very difficult task ; with it, all teachers presently involved in the program can see how their work relates to the work of others. Also, teachers who become active in the program in the future will be able to see what has been done before. In addition, graduate students can find out what to expect generally from specific courses they may take. Finally, serious study of the content of each course may lead to further ideas for improving and integrating the program. Such efforts, however, can become controversial sources of conflict and any steps will be gradual and cautious.

Final Remarks

What is the purpose of graduate training in our field? Obviously, part of the purpose is to broaden the knowledge and skills needed by potential or working teachers to be effective, or more effective, in the classroom. In addition, increasing the levels of sophistication about research and the abilities to be able to do research are part of the mission to improve the profession. Helping students become better teachers and better researchers seem to be at the center. Because our program is in Thailand, and all of our students are Thai, another element of our task is to improve their own levels of English so that they, in turn, can help others.

Much less tangible, but no less important, are the areas of critical thinking and attitudes conducive to lifelong learning and self-study. Critical thinking does not come naturally and it is never easy, but the necessity for it cuts to the very core of graduate programs all over the world. Without developing student skills and tendencies to analyze (rather than rationalize) and base actions on thoughtful reasoning (rather than personal prejudices), no program can really call itself successful. Many students would rather be spoon-fed easy answers than to struggle with the

more difficult realities. Some teachers stop learning after graduate school because they have never really learned how to think deeply about matters of professional importance.

The issue for teacher educators, then, is to take care of the obvious responsibilities and, at the same time, work to broaden the students' horizons so that they can go forward and keep learning throughout their lives. The challenges we face seem clear but are also complex. They require our continuing commitment in the face of ever-changing conditions and, in the end, there is no end because to serve our students well we must keep studying and expanding our own horizons.

The Author

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Figure 1**Courses in the Mahidol M.A. Program in Applied Linguistics
(English for Specific Purposes)**

Note that course titles are undergoing changes ; these are tentative.

CORE COURSES

Introduction to Scientific Thinking and Rhetoric (changed course)

Introduction to Applied Linguistics (changed course)

Aspects of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Developing and Evaluating Materials for ESP

General Methodology in Language Teaching

Practicum in Teaching English (made a core course)

Testing and Evaluation

Writing for Academic Purposes

Statistics and Research Methodology

REGULAR ELECTIVES (once in every two year cycle)

Oral Expression

Audio-Visual Materials and Methodology

Pedagogical Grammar

Teaching Reading in a Foreign Language (new course)

Psychology of Language Learning

OCCASIONAL ELECTIVES (less than once in every two year cycle)

Topics in Applied Linguistics (e.g. Communicative Language Teaching)

Curriculum Planning in English Language Teaching

Seminar in Teaching ESP (e.g. English for Business)

Practicum in Translation

English Phonetics and the Teaching of Listening

Etc.

Figure 2**Sample Sequence of Courses for the M.A. Degree at Mahidol
(Applied Linguistics--English for Specific Purposes)****Year 1**

PRE-SESSIONAL (2 weeks)

SEMESTER 1 :

Introduction to Scientific Thinking and Rhetoric (non-credit)

Introduction to Applied Linguistics

General Methodology in Language Teaching

Elective

Elective

SEMESTER 2 :

Aspects of English for Specific Purposes

Testing and Evaluation

Statistics and Research Methodology

Elective

Year 2

PRE-SESSIONAL (1 day program beginning in 1987)

SEMESTER 1 :

Developing and Evaluating Materials for ESP

Writing for Academic Purposes

Practicum in Teaching English

Elective

SEMESTER 2 :

Thesis work