Teaching English as a Foreign Language:[1] The Experiences of a Thai University

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It may seem that the situation in which we teach English at Chulalongkorn University is but little different from that of other institutions of higher learning around the world: English is for us a Foreign and not a Second Language; we have several thousands of students to cater for; there are problems of learner-motivation and teacher-training; English teaching in the schools leaves much to be desired; and there is all too little time in which to achieve both long-term developmental objectives and short-term teaching/learning goals. At the same time, however, we need to face up to certain difficulties that may be less familiar. In what follows I shall therefore spell out the main features of our attempt to solve all our various problems. It will then be possible to consider whether our efforts are bearing fruit, and perhaps to take a look at the future of English as a vehicle of international communication from the viewpoint of Chulalongkorn University and the wider Thai and Southeast Asian contexts.

In Thailand students come to university with up to ten years of school English behind them. In this light, our aims may appear somewhat modest. We set out to do four things:

first, we wish to raise the level of achievement of all the students so that it is at least sufficient for minimally meaningful communication in English to be possible;

secondly, we hope to give our students a solid basis of achievement such that they can build upon it with self-confidence if, after graduating, they find themselves needing to improve their English further;

thirdly, we must cater for the needs of the many students who may be required to refer to academic textbooks and journals as a part of their undergraduate studies; and

finally, it is necessary for us to give advanced studies to that substantial number of students who need, especially after graduating, to study, to make contacts, to interchange ideas, and to

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operate on the international scene, through the medium of English.

In order to show how our four broad aims are translated into course specifications, syllabuses, and teaching/learning materials, it is necessary at this point to give a brief account of the background against which we work. Chulalongkorn University was founded in 1917, the first of what now amount to fourteen universities. As well as being the oldest, it covers the widest range of subjects, with fourteen faculties and one hundred and twenty six departments. Over 3,000 students are admitted each year, and at present there is a total of some 12,500 undergraduate students and roughly 3,500 post-graduates. A degree course normally lasts four years, though in the faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Veterinary Science, and Architecture it is longer.

Students arrive at university after twelve years of schooling. A foreign language is an optional subject from the fifth year of primary school, and in the first few years at the secondary level is a required study only for those on the Arts side. In the two final secondary school years, Arts-oriented students must study a second foreign language, and Science-oriented students are required to study a first foreign language. In fact, because of social and parental pressures, and because of a lack of teachers of foreign languages other than English, virtually all Thai school children learn English from the third year of primary through to the final year of secondary school. Thus, most of our freshman students have studied English for up to ten years; unfortunately, the standards of teaching are generally low, and the levels of English achieved by the students are very disappointing.

At Chulalongkorn University, it was originally the responsibility of the Department of English to provide not only English Language and Literature courses for the relatively small number of students in the department, but also to provide "service English" courses for a large number of students, mostly in faculties other than the Faculty of Arts. At a later stage, five of these faculties had English units of their own which either supplemented the English courses provided already, or supplied them for the first time. Thus it came about that there were six separate bodies teaching English in the university. When difficulties due to the very large number of students and the general shortage of teachers were then compounded by the use of a variety of syllabuses and often unsatisfactory teaching materials, the end result, unsurprisingly, was generally not satisfactory. Only the most industrious students obtained real benefit from their English courses, and after graduation few students were able to use English for effective international communication.

In 1972 we were fortunate to have help from Professor Francis Johnson, then Professor of English at the University of Papua New Guinea. Thanks to the British Council, Professor Johnson was invited to make an in-depth study

of the needs for English teaching throughout the university, and to recommend a plan for rationalizing and reorganizing this teaching. The so-called 'Johnson Report' was fully endorsed by the University Council, and it has formed the basis of development since 1972. It made three major recommendations:

first, that a centre be established to service the English needs of all faculties;

secondly, that, in order to achieve maximum cost effectiveness and optimal learning, we should move away from lock-step, teacher-centred teaching to an individualized, self-study approach which would allow a student to begin his English studies at an appropriate level, and to progress through his course at his own speed; and

thirdly, that work begin immediately so that a new syllabus and new course materials would be ready for the academic year 1975-1976.

I feel it is important to spell out how long it has taken for us to reach a point where we are in sight of realizing the goals we set ourselves way back in 1972. It was in 1974 that the university officially set up the 'English Language Centre Project', and only in November 1977 that the present-day Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (or CULI) was added to the formal structure of the university. It was also in 1977 that the first British Council specialist began to help us to supervise and co-ordinate our mammoth task of reorganization and materials development. In 1978, we were able to try out the pilot version of the materials for first-year students. three years after the date envisaged in the Johnson Report. Now, in late 1980, we can say with some confidence that the largest part of our teaching materials will be in published form by the end of 1981. This will still leave considerable work to be done on the testing side, so that only in 1982-a full decade after we had accepted Johnson's recommendations-can we see an end to the first great effort to produce teaching and testing materials.

I should like to stress that these ten years have been marked by co-operation and assistance from all sides. The university authorities have enthusiastically backed the project from the start, and have provided the substantial material and financial support that has been needed; we have been given solid professional support by the British Council and the now Overseas Development Administration of the British Foreign Office; we have had the ready use of our own University Press for materials publication; and, above all, we have had the hard and devoted work of a large number of CULI staff, both Thai and expatriate. The important point is, then, not that a project such as ours requires goodwill, great common effort, as much help as possible, and a great deal of hard work, but that even when given all these, such a project takes a number of years to bring to a satisfactory conclusion.

Two further points of seemingly general importance should be made. As the dates I have given show, the time needed to produce a revised, published version of our teaching and testing materials is about five years, from 1977 to 1982. This may seem a long time; in fact, compared with similar projects around the world, we have set ourselves far tighter deadlines than is usual. The second point is that, because our efforts to date have necessarily concentrated mainly upon the production of materials, we have only now in 1980 been able to begin upon a clear and coherent programme of staff development. Given the direction we have taken–to develop a large quantity of new materials, and, as far as possible, to move towards individualization–staff development is of crucial importance. As with materials development, this takes time. Now, however, let me describe more clearly what exactly we are trying to do.

All Thai universities now operate on a semester and credit/grade system, and at Chulalongkorn a typical four-year degree requires that a student study a course that totals 130 or, in the case of a Science degree, 140 credits. Of these, the government has decreed that 36 credits be used for 'general education', and that six of these be used for a foreign language. At Chulalongkorn, we have decided that these six credits should be given to a 'Foundation English Course'. This enables CULI to provide all 3,000 or so first-year students with a 5-hour a week English course through both semesters, giving an effective course length of roughly 130 class periods. However, only in eight of our fourteen faculties are there compulsory credits for English after the first-year. These further credits then allow CULI to provide post-Foundation courses that total between 40 and 210 effective classroom periods.

As far as compulsory credits for English are concerned, we have a situation in which large blocks of students are continually leaving the system. Thus whereas some 3,000 students follow the first-year course, only some 2,000 of these stay with us for the first semester of the second year, and only about 1,200 of these stay with us for the second semester. In the third year the number falls to about 750, and in the fourth year only some 150 of the students stay with us. These facts have led to two decisions that have significant pedagogic results. First, we have attempted to organize a series of courses each of which forms some clear end-point for the learners. In other words, we have tried to avoid the situation where students would be left hanging in the air simply because they had no further compulsory credits for English. Secondly, we have in the main felt it desirable to develop courses which concentrate on particular language skills. As we shall see, there are other reasons for this tendency to avoid 'integrated-skills' courses.

When we think of international communication, we tend, I think, to see

it primarily as a two-way process. However, for very many people in the world, including many of our Thai students, both before and after graduating, the hard fact is that for them the most important type of communication is the one-way process of reading. I do not think there can be any question that the world-wide need for English as a means of international communication must include the reading of English as a vehicle for learning; to deny this proposition would be seriously to diminish the possible role of English around the world. Thus it is that within CULI we have decided to give the major emphasis to the reading skill. Having taken this decision, we then have felt the further need to develop courses which, as far possible, cater for the particular subject-matter interests of the students in the various faculties we handle.

The overall strategy adopted by CULI is to arrange compulsory courses at three successive levels :

1. Foundation English .(FE) in year one,
2. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in year two, and
3. Advanced English (AE) in years three and four.

The 130-hour Foundation English Course is our attempt to satisfy the first two of the four broad aims that we set ourselves: to improve the students' English so that they can communicate in it in a minimally sufficient way, and to supply a firm foundation for any later English studies, whenever they come. The EAP year is given over to a 40-hour first semester Reading Course and a 50-hour second semester Writing Course, the former relating to our third broad aim of developing sufficient reading skill in the students so that they can use English as an undergraduate study-tool, and the latter, like the Advanced English courses, looking more towards our fourth aim, which is to cater more for the needs of the students after graduation. At present the FE reading and listening components and the EAP Reading Course are designed so that they can be used for individualized self-study, and the remaining courses are designed to be taught.

In the first year, our course must in solid measure be remedial, since the matriculation system makes it possible for students with very poor English to enter the university. At the same time it must cope with the needs of students who are spread over a very wide range of achievement in English, and who probably also have very different motivations and levels of aptitude. The main emphasis is upon reading, with separate listening and speaking classes in equal second place. For various administrative and pedagogic reasons we have, at least for this year, decided that all students should follow the whole of the FE reading component; the idea of differential entry points is desirable but in our present circumstances hard to operate satisfactorily.

Like the reading component of FE, the EAP Reading Course is designed to be used within an individualized, self-paced programme. There are, however, four major differences between the two sets of materials. First, the starting-point for the FE component was a structural syllabus to which a functional/notional orientation was added, whereas the EAP Reading Course was developed by first selecting appropriate texts and then allowing the syllabus to emerge by selecting teaching/learning points contained in these texts. Secondly, the greater interest in content at the EAP level is reflected in a greater attention to providing solid reading experience, and, as a concomitant, in paying less attention to the form of the language. Thirdly, the EAP course puts far more emphasis on going beyond words and structures-beyond lexis and syntax-and so on having the students end up with their attention firmly upon the meaning of the texts. Finally, the EAP Reading Course is largely modular and makes a serious attempt to cater for the particular interests of the students in different faculties. We could, perhaps characterize the FE reading texts as 'factual English', and say that within this constraint the course is a general one. The EAP texts, as well as being longer and more difficult, are far more closely related to the academic interests of the students-hence the 'EAP' in the title for the course. As the materials on display at the conference show, we have developed two 'common core' books and various faculty-specific books. However, because of the time constraint that we have faced, some units appear, at least for the present, in more than one book.

The EAP Writing Course is a notably less 'advanced' course than is the EAP Reading Course. This is necessarily the case, not only because the students leave school with such poor control over written English, but also because we feel forced during the FE year-for reasons I hope you now understand-to attend primarily to other matters. In fact, although we include some work on writing in the second semester reading component of year one, we have, at least for the present, felt it necessary to make this work optional. Being less advanced, the EAP Writing course makes less of an attempt than does the EAP Reading Course to meet faculty-specific interests. The principal aims here are modest : to introduce the student to ideas about paragraph organization and to give him practice in producing structured paragraphs.

Our Advanced English courses are provided for the 600 or so students of the Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy, the 120 or so students of the Faculty of Communication Arts, and the 30 or so students in the Faculty of Political Science who are in the International Relations Department. The emphasis at this level is firmly upon writing, and, to the extent that we attempt to deal as far as possible with the specific English of the students' main areas of study, these courses are within the tradition of

English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The aim here is to extend the students' skills to a level at which they can be used in daily life, especially after graduation. There is also a Social English Course, which concentrates on straight forward conversational English on factual topics and on the social language of daily exchange. In addition, we need to run translation classes for Communication Arts students, since translation skills will be very important to them after graduation.

It would not be appropriate here to go into further details of our aims, syllabuses, and materials. However, there are several topics arising from or related to what I have already had to say that are of quite general interest : the relation between our materials and world-wide developments in Foreign Language Teaching; the need for the students to have feedback; the need to evaluate the materials and to measure student progress ; the desirability of providing individualized course materials that are branching rather than linear; and the demands of individualized materials such as ours upon the students and the teachers.

Language teaching in Thailand, in both schools and tertiary level institutions, is still strongly influenced by the historical background. Especially in primary schools, there is still considerable rote-learning, and there is a strong tendency at all levels to see the teacher as the "expert" and the learner as the absorber of the received knowledge. It is still largely true that 'learning' is equated with the memorization of facts. Thus, to see learning as a process of enquiry and self-development is difficult for many of us, and the idea that it might preferably be learner-centred runs counter to the learning habits acquired by students during their formative years. All this should throw light on CULI's decision to move towards an individualized learning strategy; what we are attempting is very radical. As I have already indicated at one or two points we need to be flexible and we need to take a gradual, evolutionary approach. We are aware of the kinds of developments that are taking place around the world, but we must all the time take care to fit new ideas into our own particular situation; to do otherwise is to put all our work at risk.

A necessary element of an individualized programme is the provision of adequate feedback to the learners. Thus it is that we provide Answer Keys and, in the case of the FE reading component, require the learners to take frequent and regular progress tests. Our experience so far indicates two difficulties. First, there is a problem of persuading the students to use the Answer Keys responsibly and appropriately. This is obviously even more of a problem when the learners choose to work outside the classroom and so beyond the eye of the teacher. It is not enough for us to say that it is the learner who is the loser if he misuses the Keys; the real problem is that of how we can develop in the learner an appropriate and mature enough

learning strategy. The second difficulty is the size of the administrative task we find being imposed upon our teachers. Our students do require constant monitoring and supervision, and we have discovered that in order to simplify and lessen the teachers' burden it is necessary to adopt a more rigid approach than we would wish. Clearly, we have much to think about on the issue of feedback.

The institute itself also needs feedback, both as to the strengths and weaknesses of the course materials and as to the degree of success or failure with which learning takes place. Our first discovery was that a full-scale formative evaluation of the materials required time and resources that we could not manage. As far as the students were concerned, the additional burden of completing evaluation questionnaires was simply unacceptable. It later became clear that if we were to monitor progress within an individualized course satisfactorily, and were, at the same time, to achieve real test security, then we needed to embark upon a large-scale test development programme. A final point of general interest on the question of testing for progress relates to the distinction between 'enabling' and 'terminal' objectives. Whereas it might seem quite reasonable to suppose that it would be sufficient to test the latter, it is our experience that we need to test the former as well. The reason for this seems simply to be that our students feel disoriented and unhappy unless they can see a direct and obvious relationship between the course and tests. Once again, we find ourselves needing to temper the ideal in the light of our particular situation.

Our FE reading component is a form of linear programme, with the students constantly being tested for mastery of the section they have just worked through. This has faced us with the familiar problem of how to deal with unsatisfactory progress or insufficient mastery. Our solution has been to develop what we call 'clinic' materials, to which students can be directed whenever the tests indicate specific language problems. It is clear, on the basis of our experience, that a branching programme is preferable to a linear one, but, unfortunately, this would impose a considerably greater task of producing the materials. Our EAP Reading Course attempts a somewhat different approach. First, testing is restricted to one mid-semester and one final examination, and, secondly, the units of the course are, as far as possible, self-contained, or modular. Therefore, the possibilty exists of moving through each half of the course, and to some extent through each unit, in whichever order seems best. As far as the student is concerned, this choice is most likely to be based upon subject-matter, but the teacher can guide his students in terms of his advance knowledge of the contents of each unit.

The final topic that I would like to develop at this stage is that of the demands of individualized materials upon both our students and our teachers. As

I have already intimated, educational thinking and attitudes within the classroom tend to be rather conservative in Thailand, and an individualized, learner-centred approach represents a quite new direction for us. Our experience shows us that it requires just as much, sometimes perhaps more, hard work, both for learners and teachers. It requires of the student self-discipline and self-restraint, and it calls for a new philosophy and a new range of classroom techniques from the teachers. For both, a considerable reorientation is needed. Thus it is that on several issues we have found it necessary to be very flexible; we are working slowly towards a new future and must tread our way with care, tact, and patience.

So far, I have tried to set out for you something of our philosophy, our hopes, our work, our problems, and our tentative solutions to our problems. At the same time, I have tried to bring into the open certain issues of wider significance, and make it clear that much still remains to be done. Now, however, let me try to give you an impression of where we think we have arrived after nearly a decade of hard work.

As a part of the Pilot Project for the Foundation English Course, an evaluative study was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 1978-79. The population consisted of 1,154 students from the Faculties of Commerce and Accountancy, Engineering, and Political Science. The study was carried out to evaluate, among other things, the effectiveness of the self-study reading component and the attitudes of the students towards the new self-study approach.

The results of the pre-test and post-test showed that the gain scores were statistically significant at the .01 level. A control group of 91 students from the Faculty of Law were given the same pre-test and post-test. This group followed a substantially different reading course which nevertheless had similar objectives and lasted about the same number of contact hours as the FE first semester reading component. On entry to the course, the students in the control group were very similar to Level 2 students in the experimental group. Level 2 represents an average English reading ability for the total population. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test results for the experimental group and the control group is given below :-

Group	N	$\bar{X}$ Pre-test	S.D.	$\bar{X}$ Post-test	S.D.	Gain Score
Experimental (Total)	1154	79.580	15.090	87.050	14.852	7.470
Experimental (Level 2)	627	75.275	11.683	83.083	11.400	7.808
Control	91	76.198	13.240	76.374	15.053	0.176

Although not too much should be read into these results, given that the tests both related to the FE reading component, it is nevertheless encouraging that the control group failed to make a comparable gain after a similar period of instruction using different materials with similar objectives. The results of the questionnaire given to the students showed that 57.73% thought the course was "good" 35.21% thought it was "satisfactory" and 10.06% thought it was "not good". In an earlier study, made before the Pilot Project, students had indicated that they were in favour of the self-study approach.

The first indications were, then, not only that the individualized, self-study approach was at the very least a significant improvement on what had gone before, but also that the students seemed to have a positive attitude towards the new strategy. Now, some two years after these first impressions, and after a final revision of the materials, we are still able only to talk of our impressions; the research resources that a respectable study would demand have quite simply been beyond us. Nevertheless, there is a variety of circumstantial evidence which strongly suggests that the FE reading component is achieving significantly better results than did the various programmes that it replaced. In the light of the several problems we have experienced with this new approach, this is most encouraging. As for post-Foundation courses, it is too early for us to have any strong impressions, but as far as we can see the other materials we have produced, or are still producing, are being accepted and put to use with many fewer difficulties than was the case when we first introduced the FE reading component. It would be nice to think that we are learning by experience. Now, however, I must try to round off this account of our experiences at Chulalongkorn University by taking a look at the future and by trying to place our work in a larger context.

Within CULI, there is much still to be done. Although we are now moving away from materials production to staff development, we must in time face at least a revision of existing materials. In addition, our work so far has necessarily concentrated upon courses for compulsory credits, but in many faculties there are elective credits that students may wish to use for English, and both post-graduates and members of staff also require our services. In some areas at least, the importance of English for our students will increase. Already, we are making plans for a substantial English programme which will make possible a two-year post-graduate degree course in Business Administration. This is the first full degree programme in our university which will in all respects be in the medium of English.

This new degree should in itself be evidence enough for you of the importance to Thailand of English as a medium of international communication. Within Southeast Asia, in the fields of education, commerce, politics, and interpersonal

exchange, the use of English is a daily occurrence, and the pressure for more and better English is strongly felt. The same is also true, of course, for our relations outside the region. Having said this, however, I would like to end by pointing out some of the limitations we shall have to learn to live with.

Despite 700 years of national independence and despite having its own language, with its own writing system, Thailand has, for more than 50 years, given substantial time, effort, and money to the teaching of English. Nevertheless, it is a luxury for us to attempt such a large-scale foreign language programme, for most Thais plainly do not have any real daily need for any foreign language. Sadly, the vast annual expenditure on English is not being justified by the results, though few people except educationists are aware of quite how great is the waste of time and resources. Nevertheless, the social and political will is that this effort and expense continue, though, a developing nation as we are, we can ill afford the cost. Because of the low standards we achieve in the schools, the burden placed on tertiary level institutions is that much greater. We accept this responsibility gladly, for we are convinced that Thailand can only play its full part in the affairs of the world if it gives sufficient attention to English as a medium for international communication.