

English for Academic Purposes in Thailand—an Overview
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by

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Foreign language teaching has a long history with a bewildering variety of pedagogical approaches, techniques, and areas of emphasis.

Over the years, for example, we have talked of the grammar-translation approach, the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, of language as a cognitive code, the Silent Way, and of functional and notional considerations, to mention only a few. We have called ourselves specialists in ELT (English Language Teaching), ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language), and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), as well as learning facilitators and just plain teachers. While some of this variety is sheer proliferation of terminology, a certain amount of it reflects a greater understanding of the scope of our task and its ramifications, as well as some genuine advances. We have come a long way, and we have been influenced by and have learned from other disciplines, especially psychology, education, and linguistics. One of the latest developments in our field, that of teaching English for Special Purposes, owes part of its genesis to the linguists' ability to specify how samples of language may differ, and part to the educator's never ending problem of balancing objectives, resources, and time. It is more with the latter aspect, ESP as an answer to the educator's dilemma, that I am concerned here.

On the one hand, the proliferation of approaches to ELT, and competing methodologies, may be taken as a sign of vigor and dynamism in our field, reflecting the influences on ELT of related disciplines. It is, as well, a sign of the wide-ranging research and experimentation that have been brought to bear on our problems.

On the other hand, we must recognize that many of these "new approaches in ELT" have developed in response to widespread feelings that the "old" approaches had failed. The ELT field seems to wake up periodically with the cry that the current techniques are not working, and that something new must be found.

There have probably been as many acronyms to refer to the variety of programs for teaching English to non-native speakers as there have been methodologies for use in the classroom. Countries such as India, Singapore, and the Philippines, for example, have had TESL programs -- teaching English as a second language. In these countries, and elsewhere, English serves totally or partially as a medium of instruction in the primary, secondary, and/or tertiary levels of the educational system, as an official language, or as an important medium of communication between various groups. Students in these countries may need to know English nearly as well as their first or native language, and in some cases they may need to develop a fluency in certain registers beyond what they have in their mother tongue.

In Thailand, on the other hand, we have defined our task as TEFL, or teaching English as a foreign language. This is also the case in Indonesia, Malaysia and many other countries. English is studied only as another academic subject, and it is not used as a medium of instruction, as an official language, nor as an important medium of internal communication.

In the United States, these differences between EFL and ESL are obscured by the use of the term ESOL, or English for Speakers of Other Languages. Thus, ESOL can refer to either the EFL situation, in which students are not in an English-using environment, and thus receive little exposure to the language, or to the ESL situation, in which the student sees and hears the language around him much more, and must come to use it as well.

What are the implications of the fact that in Thailand we teach EFL and not ESL? Obviously, the students have less exposure to English, and at all levels they probably have a lower proficiency in English than their counterparts in an ESL country. And yet they still have a need to understand quite complex language in some situations. Thus, we ask our university students in many disciplines to read textbooks and articles in English, and we have economic, political, scientific, and technological contacts with other countries, many of which are necessarily carried out in English. In fact, after their secondary education, many students will have some need for English, but few are able to meet this need when they leave school. However, since Thailand is essentially a monolingual society, most people who do need English require it only for limited purposes -- they need only a sub-set of the language, and not the full range that a native speaker or a speaker of English as a second language commands.

The inadequacies of ELT in Thailand have been apparent for some time. Surveys and research have indicated that there are problems not only at the primary and secondary levels, but also at the tertiary level¹. As a result, various measures have been taken to improve the situation, the most recent being the Ministry of Education's new language policy for the primary and secondary schools². Under this policy, English will no longer be a required subject in primary schools, and will be an elective subject for secondary school students. It is hoped that under the new policy, the limited number of qualified English teachers will not be spread so thinly, and, as a consequence, that the general level of English among those who do study the language will improve. Nevertheless, this poses a potential problem for tertiary-level teachers of English. At this level, students are often expected, and sometimes required, to read academic materials in English, although under the new policy future secondary school students may move to tertiary education without ever having studied English³.

We at the university level are well aware of the problems facing ELT in Thailand. In situations such as ours, it is usually only at the tertiary level that the students are first called upon to show an acceptable level of linguistic performance with materials designed for native speakers of English. After years and years of studying books written for foreign learners of English, our students suddenly have to study academic subjects from textbooks written for British or American university students. We should not be surprised that the students find it difficult to understand these books, but neither can we avoid the responsibility of trying to ensure that they learn to understand them before proceeding very far into their university careers.

To review for a minute the nature of the problem: because Thailand has chosen to teach English as a foreign language, and because there is a shortage of qualified teachers and a lack of suitable materials, many students enter the university with a low level of English proficiency. Yet most of these students will have a need, as a minimum, to read some academic materials - textbooks or articles - in English during their university education (even though in certain disciplines the number of textbooks written in or translated into Thai is increasing). Many of them will have other uses for English during their university years, and afterwards they may be expected to participate in commercial, political, scientific, or technological contacts with other countries. There are further aspects to the problem, almost too obvious to mention: 1) our teaching time (as well as the student's learning time) in the university is limited, and 2) for speakers of South East Asian languages, English is a difficult language.

The answer that has been widely proposed to this problem (and it is a worldwide problem) has the label ESP, or English for Special Purposes. Our concern as tertiary educators at this conference is within the general area of ESP, but we

have chosen to use the term EAP, or English for Academic Purposes. This may be taken to include J.R. Ewer's STTE - Scientific, Technological, and Technical English⁴, and the term used at the 1975 RELC seminar, ESTP--English for Scientific and Technical Purposes⁵, as well as the English needed by those on the non-scientific side.

Even when the terms ESP and EAP were still poorly known in Thailand, some of the universities recognized the need for special courses for specific groups of students. At Chula, for example, courses were set up in "English for Science students", "English for Engineering students", and "English for Commerce and Accountancy students". In doing this, we were in step with the general trend of the ELT profession in the 70's, which has been away from general English programs and towards teaching in terms of more closely defined needs of specific groups of learners. Much of the work in ESP has emanated from the U.K. - the work of Peter Strevens, Henry Widdowson at Edinburgh, Christopher Candlin at Lancaster, and David Wilkins at Reading has been especially notable. Elsewhere, Larry Selinker and Louise Trimble in the U.S.A., and J.R. Ewer at the University of Chile have been vocal proponents of ESP programs.

In Thailand, CIEL (the Central Institute of English Language, Office of University Affairs), now part of the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI), has been in the forefront of the search for solutions to ELT problems at the tertiary level. One of CIEL's most significant contributions was the organization of a seminar for language specialists and university administrators in Chiangmai in May 1974, to discuss the learning and teaching of English at the university level. This timely seminar prepared the university administrators for developments to come, and their awareness of the severity of the problems, and their ready and strong support for proposed solutions, has been essential for the improvement of "service" English programs.

Why are Thai universities developing EAP programs? The first reason is already implicit in the decision to teach English as a Foreign Language--most students do not need command of all aspects of the language, but rather need to be able to use the language in rather limited and defineable ways--usually, that is, as a tool for studying various subjects from textbooks that are written in English. Therefore, it makes sense to teach them what they need to know, and not to teach them other aspects of the language, such as those peculiar to literature or informal conversation. Secondly, we have had to accept that general English programs by and large have failed to raise students to the level at which they are able to use English effectively for study purposes. Our freshmen students cannot read English language textbooks rapidly and with good comprehension. Of course, this failure of general English programs is worldwide - such programs have often suffered from a lack of clear focus, and have taught aspects of the language that a science or

commerce student will seldom meet. In addition, they have tended to teach about the language, viewing it as composed of isolated building blocks, or language elements, and giving little consideration to the communicative function of language.

We should not take this failure of general English courses to imply that all English programs should be ESP. Even at the tertiary level, we at Chula feel that there are two valid arguments for courses that are not designed for specific purposes, that is, for modified general English courses - first, as a foundation for more advanced work, and, secondly, as an essential component in the general education of a person in the world of today, for English is more widely used as a first or second language or as the medium of communication than any other tongue. But even these modified general English courses have not proved sufficient, and so we have sought to go beyond them and create EAP programs.

EAP is not meant as a cure-all, a panacea that will resolve all the problems of ELT in Thailand. It should be seen, instead, as a way of using our limited resources of time, money, and trained personnel to the best advantage. We must maximize our efficiency and so do our best to meet the needs of our students.

I have previously mentioned the May 1974 seminar on English at the tertiary level, organized by CIEL. Part of this included presentations by heads of English departments and units on the programs they directed. At that time, tertiary-level English programs fell into three types. First, there were programs of general English, as, for example, at Thammasart. At that time there were 4 semester-length courses in general English, and the more advanced courses were primarily oriented towards English majors and minors. At the opposite pole from Thammasart, there were programs which sought to give the students EAP as quickly as possible, as, for example, with the science-oriented English program for pre-med and science students at Mahidol. Thirdly, between the two extremes, there were those universities that began by teaching a general English program for one year, and then moved to EAP in the students' second year. At the time of the Chiangmai conference, Chula, Kasetsart, and Chiangmai Universities were in this category⁸.

Shortly before this 1978 National EAP Conference, CULI sent out a questionnaire to the eight universities and post-graduate institutions of Thailand. The results give us a clearer picture of the present ELT situation at the tertiary level. First, it is clear that the idea of EAP has taken hold in Thai universities⁷. All but two of the responding institutions offer some type of EAP program, either as their sole English program, or in conjunction with some type of General English courses. In the remainder of this paper, I intend to pick out some significant aspects of these EAP programs.

EAP courses in Thailand have grown up in response to various needs: all institutions mention "reading textbooks" as a reason why students need EAP courses.

Most "Technical English" programs go back only to 1975; Chula and Ramkhamhaeng plan to start new EAP programs in the not too distant future, although Chula has had English programs for special fields of study for several years.

EAP programs currently being offered, or soon to be offered, are in many cases organized and run outside the traditional English departments, with a central "service" English organization. Only Chiangmai, Mahidol, and Ramkhamhaeng have or will have an English department in charge of EAP programs.

Because EAP is a relatively new field, both in the development of ELT, and in its application in Thailand, those institutions that have adopted the EAP idea as the basis of their courses have been faced with a certain paucity of material and therefore with an opportunity to re-think the design and methods of their courses. There are, of course, increasing numbers of published texts available in the EAP field, but all of the universities that have EAP programs use materials that have been specially prepared at their respective institutions: some use these special materials exclusively, and some use them in conjunction with published materials. At all institutions except AIT, the Thai staff has worked on the preparation of these materials, and in all cases they have been aided by native speakers - either contract teachers or ELT specialists.

In the preparation of these materials, and in teaching the resulting courses, teachers at Chula, KMIT, Mahidol, NIDA, and Songkhla have consulted specialists in each field of study for which English is taught. This has enabled the teachers to meet the needs of the students better, and it also has given them the opportunity to learn something about the subject matter that forms the basis of their materials. Indeed, it has been a recurrent problem in the switch-over to EAP in Thailand that English teachers trained in language and literature find it difficult to teach materials that deal with science and technology, or other fields with which they may not be familiar.

Several institutions have re-considered their approaches to and methods of teaching. Kasetsart and Mahidol still define their approach as primarily a structural one, but Chula and KMIT are working primarily with a notional-functional approach to syllabus-design, and Chiangmai, AIT, and Songkhla have an eclectic approach that pays heavy attention to the notional and functional aspects of language.

The new programs being developed at Chula, as well as programs at Chiangmai, KMIT, and NIDA, have in some measure a self-instructional approach, which seems to combine well with the end-goal of producing students who can learn effectively from textbooks written in English.

While the ideal might be to produce EAP courses that are specialized for each field of study, the practicalities of writing materials have made it necessary in most cases to design EAP courses for students in a group of related fields. Some courses are designed for specific faculties, but it seems that in Thailand at least it is not yet possible for us to design or teach courses for a single specific field.

Several institutions have made use of placement tests in order to insure more homogeneous classes. Among these institutions are AIT, Chiangmai, Kasetsart, KMIT, and NIDA. When the English program at CULI begins, students will take a placement test before entering the first year Foundation Course, and will be allowed to begin the course at any of four entry points.

I have mentioned that one of the problems that EAP programs might help to solve is that of lack of time for learning English. Since most universities have found that they cannot increase the number of teaching hours for English, they have turned to an EAP course design in order to use the existing hours more efficiently. Most institutions with EAP courses have students scheduled for 3 hours of classwork and 1 hour of language laboratory a week, although in some cases the proportion of time allocated to each activity may vary. The emphasis is weighted towards reading and writing: reading in most cases is 50% or more of the program, and writing seems to take up about 25% of the time.

Are EAP programs working? It is too soon to tell, but the preliminary results look favorable. AIT, KMIT, NIDA, and Mahidol have expressed general satisfaction with their programs. They cite such factors as high motivation among students and staff, and an increased ability of the students to read the texts they are assigned. These are exactly the results we would hope for from programs which attempt to deal with the rather specific reading needs of groups of students. Naturally we will have to keep an eye on these programs, and we may expect the programs to run into teething troubles, but the current status of EAP in Thailand seems to be relatively favorable.

Notes

1. The Ministry of Education survey of ELT at all levels, in 1964; the report on tertiary-level ELT by the survey team of the National Education Council in 1968; and the CIEL questionnaire of students and teachers in 1973, prior to the May 1974 seminar in Chiangmai.
2. *Syllabus for the Elementary Education*, 1978 and *Syllabus for the Lower Secondary Education*, 1978, Ministry of Education, Thailand.
3. This interpretation of the 1978 Syllabuses is an extreme, i.e. it is possible that a high school graduate, following these Syllabuses, may not have taken even one English course. However, in practice so far, students expecting to continue their

education at the tertiary level have been guided to take English programs necessary for their area of specialization at the tertiary level.

4. Kanda Sitachitta, and Panninee Sagarik, "Problems and Attempts at Solutions in the Teaching of ESP at the Tertiary Level in Thailand" *Teaching English for Science and Technology*, Edited by Jack Richards, Regional English Language Centre, Anthology Series 2, Singapore University Press, 1976.
5. In 1975 the SEAMEO Regional Language Centre (Then Regional English Language Centre) in Singapore organized 2 seminars on ESTP: RELC 10th Seminar, (April 21-25, 1975) on "The Teaching and Learning of English for Scientific and Technological Purposes in Southeast Asia"; and RELC 11th Seminar (July 28-August 1, 1975) on "Curriculum Development and Syllabus Design for English Teaching with some Focus on the Needs in Science, Technology and Commerce" Reports on both Seminars are published and available at RELC, Singapore.
6. "Report on the University Administrators and Specialists Seminar on the Learning and Teaching of English at the University Level", *Pasaa* (October 1974), CIEL, Thailand.
7. The abbreviations for various educational institutions mentioned in this paper are as follows:
 - AIT Asian Institute of Technology
 - KMIT King Mongkut's Institute of Technology
 - DTEC Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation (having their own English Centre to prepare government officials to go abroad under the Colombo Plan Scholarship program)
 - NIDA National Institute of Development Administration