

EIL in the Primary Classroom: Exploration and Innovation using DVDs for Communication

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Abstract: *In order for Thailand's tertiary education establishments to produce top quality graduates to compete in the international workplace, Thailand's students need to communicate in English in a meaningful way in the classroom. English is taught from the first year of primary school; however, teachers continually complain of a lack of resources and teaching materials in addition to their lack of training.*

By following the Thai foreign languages curriculum and making dialogues out of O Net and N Net test books available on the market, it was possible to make a series of six non-commercial DVDs for each year of primary school that can be used communicatively; allowing students to use English as authentically as possible in the classroom whilst still following the national curriculum.

The positive feedback received so far has encouraged participating teachers and administrators to believe that they have found a pathway to EIL (English as an International Language) for Thailand's young learners.

Keywords: *English Learning, Thai Education, Language Instruction, EIL, International Workplace*

Introduction

There is considerable debate within academia as to the best time to start teaching children a second language. Gika and Superfine (1998) cite how Freudenstein (1990) advocates that earlier is better as these children will develop improved verbal and non verbal behaviour, whilst Singleton and Lengyel (1995) counter that learning a second language at an early age does not increase competence in grammar, syntax, multi-competence or pronunciation and accent. Furthermore, Brumfit, Moon and Tongue (1995) are cited as stating that the only bad results from teaching pupils early

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would be if they were taught by untrained teachers, which is particularly relevant in the Thai context.

Whether you hold the views of structuralism and Piaget (1971), the more social constructivism of Vygotsky (1986), or the framework for multiple intelligences of Gardner (2006), one indisputable fact that remains evident today is that English is required learning from the first grade (Prathom one) in Thailand. To compound the dilemma further, in rural areas such as Isaan in the north east of Thailand, the Isaan language (Laos) is spoken at home which in turn affects the development of the child's L1, in this case the Thai language. The less L1 language a child has initially, the less chance it has to think about it and play with it in a conscious way (Pinter 2006).

For Thailand to obtain a position of significance within ASEAN and the rest of the world, the general public as well as the Thai government have to understand how important English is in relation to globalisation and technology (Foley 2005). For this to happen, Foley indicates that there has to be an overhaul in materials, methods and teaching. The general quality of teaching staff is low and at primary level, teachers are unqualified to teach English, class sizes are too big and the teaching focuses on comprehension tests and memorisation (Mackenzie 2002). Thailand is stuck in the "Second Way" as detailed by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), where top-down governmental goals, performances and targets are squashing parental choice, market competition, training, resources and most important for this study, materials; making bottom-up support by and for teachers almost impossible. The curriculum dictates that a disproportionate amount of time is spent on subjects that are not conducive to preparing students to compete in the global marketplace once they have graduated from school or university (von Feigenblatt, Suttichujit, Shuib, Keling and Ajis 2010) which is constantly demonstrated by low student results in national tests (Graham 2008).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, there are still many who enter the teaching profession to teach English for a variety of differing reasons. There has not been much

research in this area; however, Hayes (2008) details a study into teachers' lives and the reasons for becoming Thai teachers of English. In this small study five teachers actively pursued the profession whilst two chose the career for materialistic reasons, one drifted into it by accident and one was forced into teaching by family pressure. For whatever reason a person decides to become an English teacher, it is evident that there is a need for training, materials development and scaffolding to enable these hard pressed educators, especially in rural areas to achieve their goals and the extravagant and sometimes unrealistic aims of the Ministry of Education. Williams (1992) identifies two areas of concern related to the Thai EFL context. The first is the teaching of communicative skills and the second is socio-cultural competence. As English is an international commodity, it is being used by people from different countries and backgrounds. By creating a set of DVDs based on the Thai national curriculum for foreign languages, students are able to see and hear how they are to act and behave in a given context, whilst they use English as an international language.

Procedure for the Production of DVDs

The development of these teaching materials was in accordance with Tomlinson (2010) who states that materials should:

- Expose the learners to authentic language in use
- Assist learners to concentrate on authentic input
- Use the target language for communicative purposes
- Encourage feedback
- Arouse and sustain the learners' attention and curiosity
- Stimulate artistic, visual and intellectual involvement

It was also important to have materials that were engaging for the students which they could see as relevant to their daily lives (Senior 2010). Rather than have a "cross section of stakeholders" involved in the design of materials

as suggested by Hayes (2000), the author decided to use the national curriculum as a motivator and selling point to stakeholders and promote the fact that dialogues and conversations were developed from test questions available from a series of O-Net and N-Net (National Test) commercial test books on sale at local bookshops. The initial test book used was “Prepare for Examinations – Prathom One” by Modern Academic Center and retailed for 135 baht. The use of conversational exchanges was chosen to encourage students to physically speak and also to take into account the “maxims of quantity or manner” of a conversation (Clark and Amaral 2010) that students will find difficult as they do not possess enough language at the initial stages of their learning.

Initially, conversations and dialogues were constructed from the Prathom one book in order to make a CD just for listening tasks; however, one of the teachers, Ms. Pranee Boonsaeng expressed concerns during a feedback session conducted as a result of teacher training that was taking place at Bantatprachanukoon School in Ban Phue district, Udon Thani province (Graham 2009a). This project was based on the concept of “Scaling up for Change” where innovation taking place in a single classroom or school can be implemented on a wider scale (Kantamara, Hallinger and Jatiket 2006).

This Prathom one teacher was worried that as she played the CD on the DVD player, with the sound coming out of the television speakers, the students were staring attentively at the television screen and could only see the track numbers of the CD being played. What she wanted was something for them to watch too. Lotto and Holt (2010) emphasise how important vision is compared to audition in their research into the psychology of auditory perception. Subtitles in English were also requested as she thought that it would enhance the learning process for her students. The conversations and dialogues for the Prathom one CD are contained at the Appendix to Graham (2009a).

Having listened to the feedback Ms. Pranee Boonsaeng had put forward, a decision was made to produce the

Prathom two material as a DVD with fixed subtitles in English. There was no need for removable subtitles as a conscious effort was made to try to have the students read the subtitles, even though this restricted certain learning opportunities (O'Hagan 2007).

This was also the case for Prathom three and then the initial Prathom one material was revised and produced as a DVD to reflect that there was going to be only two characters talking in the conversations. Bank and Noi feature in the DVDs played by two bi-lingual teenagers who have distinctly different ways of speaking English, giving those listening a variety of models to aim for. This proved important as there were many occasions when teachers expressed concern that their students were not able to mimic exactly the stress and intonation of Bank and Noi (Jewitt 2002). It was explained that as long as the speaker was understood, then the aim of the exercise had been achieved, which proved reassuring for those concerned. Care was taken to give the best examples of English pronunciation: however, when the opportunity arose, different types of pronunciation were used by the two characters portrayed on the DVD.

The Prathom one book has nine units with 19 tests. It was impossible to include everything that is in the test book; however, all units were covered with scope to conduct vocabulary substitution and extension activities at the discretion of the teacher. An example of how the text from the test books was adapted into dialogue can be seen below:

Greeting	Introduce oneself	Ask someone's name
Hello!	My name is	
Hi!	I am	
Good morning.		What is your name?
Good afternoon.		

Good evening.		
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Prepare for Examinations – Prathom One by Modern Academic Center
Dialogue from the first page of Prathom one was adapted from the above to show the conversation below:

Hello. My name is Bank. What is your name?

Hi. My name is Noi. Pleased to meet you.

Nice to meet you too. Goodbye Noi.

Goodbye Bank.

The words that have been underlined are suggestions for word substitution later once students have become confident in using the new language structure. Students role-play Bank and Noi at first and then progress to their real names later. Good morning, good evening etc. are introduced in subsequent activities. Fisher, Gertner, Scott and Yuan (2010) indicate that a form of syntactic bootstrapping takes place as children map nouns in sentences onto roles in events, making the structures of sentences meaningful to the students. Later, verbs show meaning by their behaviour in given sentences.

The second page of Prathom one is based on a very short dialogue.

What is this?

This is a pencil. What is that?

That is a ruler.

These simple deictic expressions may seem problematic when you consider that in Thai, there are three areas to consider; *nee* (here), *nan* (there) and *noon* (far over there). Taking the Isaan dialect into account complicates things further as there is *pee* (here), *nan* (there) and *phoonah* (far over there). However, even though Foley (2005) explains that there is a need for a subtle understanding of how a language is used in Thai and global contexts, the children

who have taken part in the trials seem to grasp certain pragmatics by accepting that in English you do it one way and in Thai you do it a different way.

This can also be said for other language areas; to quote a five year old school child, “Daddy, in English we say football, in Thai we say *footbarn*.” For some children a clear distinction can be made between English and Thai. As the levels progressed through the Prathom years, the dialogues became more difficult to construct as the Thai foreign language curriculum focuses increasingly on grammar; however, where possible, conversations took place between Bank and Noi. Where it was not possible, monologues took place showing examples of grammar in context. Subjects were curriculum based including food, sports, hobbies, local culture and nationalities. In addition, making the DVDs gave the opportunity to focus on morals and ethics, a major part of Thailand’s basic education curriculum, concerning subjects such as listening to what parents say, being a good student, timely completion of homework, going to bed early on school days and washing hands before eating healthy food. Good manners were displayed throughout the scenes as an example of how to behave when using English as an international language.

The logistics proved difficult as the dialogues were written initially for linguistic reasons without any thought for the production of a set of DVDs; however, by breaking down the props page by page, scene by scene, it was possible to shoot approximately 12 to 15 pages a day. Each Prathom level contains about 30 pages and filming took around nine days for each of the three year periods of education that were shot during two consecutive summer holiday breaks. Further days were needed to re-shoot scenes that needed certain subtle changes.

The DVDs were shot at a local music and education center in Udon Thani called Chorus Line (Graham 2010a). Rates were discounted for the two periods during the successive summer breaks to make Prathoms 1-3 and 4-6 and shooting involved using a Sony Mini DV Handycam DRC-TRV25E for the video by Miss Panida Phiwdee. Sound

was recorded separately using Adobe Audition 3, Creative Wavestudio 7 and Ulead Media Sound Pro 8 for editing purposes. Finally, Adobe Premiere 6.5 was used to marry the video and sound tracks together by Mr Sarun Rattanatoowan. Post production went smoothly the first year; however, there were severe difficulties for the second as Chorus Line was flooded several times during the rainy season and there were also technical difficulties with the synchronisation of video and sound components.

Once the DVDs were complete, a painstaking process of proofreading took place to check that sound matched pictures, subtitles were spelt correctly, superimposed pictures were correct and for anything else that would detract from the learning process. The end result of the first three years of basic education (Prathoms 1-3) went online in June 2009 at www.steves-english-zone.com and has attracted thousands of downloads. WinZip files can be downloaded which contain a Windows Media file showing the video, an MP3 file which has just the audio and a Microsoft Word document that has the script. The next batch, Prathoms 4-6 went online in November 2010.

Hundreds of DVDs have been given away to teachers at training days to ensure that as many schools in the four districts covered by Educational Service Area Office 4, Udon Thani province (Kutchap, Nayung, Namsom and Ban Phue) have access to these materials. In turn, these DVDs have been copied by the teachers and given to friends and relatives.

Application in the Classroom

The majority of Thai teachers of English are experienced teachers who work under stressful conditions with heavy workloads and up until now, a small salary; however, it is important to realise that even though many have not been trained to teach using communicative activities in a learner-centred way, it does not take long for them to adapt as long as there is sufficient scaffolding. The

ethos behind the initial teacher training project was for teachers to carry on teaching the way they were used to, but to try out communicative activities as an add-on, somewhere in their lesson. The use of DVDs in the classroom was possible because many rural schools have access to DVD players and televisions (Gaikwad, Paruthi and Thies 2010), furthermore many schools have this equipment in all their classrooms, due in part to the low cost of purchasing these items (approximately \$100) and its popularity (Castleberry and Evers 2010) despite there not being many studies into the exposure of children to television (Anderson and Pempek 2005) and DVD.

The Smooth Transitions DVDs can be used in many ways, to introduce, to practice, to confirm and even to test; however, it is important to allow the Thai teachers of English the freedom to experiment with their own imagination and ideas in order to build up their confidence, whilst assisting teachers and students to understand the “sociological perspective outside the classroom” (Bingham and Hernandez 2009) as they make mistakes and laugh at their attempts to role-play. The DVDs have the ability to “contextualise in the moment both spatially and temporally while conveying a sense of motion” (Murray 2009).

Notwithstanding this, some basic procedures were suggested for those teachers that needed the extra scaffolding. If a school has a course-book that follows the national curriculum, for example, “Gogo Loves English” by Longman, then it is relatively easy to supplement the book by using the DVD to enhance related topics and themes, making them more communicative. Teachers were advised to show the section of the DVD that was relevant to a specific part of the curriculum that they were teaching and repeat it as many times as the students wanted. Then, the teacher would pause the DVD at convenient points to explain in Thai what was being said so that the students understood the meaning of what was being articulated in English (Gill 2005).

Next, the teacher would have all the boys say the Bank dialogues and the girls would repeat what was said by Noi. Having completed that task, the teacher would ask for a

volunteer from the class to simulate the scene with the teacher, pausing the DVD after each small segment (Rigg 1976) to make it easier for the students to understand and follow. It is very important at this stage for students to actually understand what they are saying compared to just copying it parrot fashion (Tkaczyk 2010). Finally, students would come out to the front of the class in pairs and act as Bank and Noi (Buggey 2007). It is important to say at this stage that all students need to be involved in these activities (Higginbotham 2009), regardless of how shy they may appear to be and because the activities are varied, there is little chance of students becoming bored (Richards 2005).

Throughout the whole procedure, students are encouraged to read the subtitles on the paused DVD. Whilst it is true that many of the young learners are not really reading; by going through this process, they soon become familiar with the words they see as they are recycled in many future dialogues and activities leading to comprehensible input (Krashen 1997).

These suggested procedures were transmitted by way of workshops and training days given to specific schools which were part of the initial implementation project as well as teachers that took part in localised training in the four districts covered by Educational Service Area Office 4, Udon Thani province (Graham 2010b). Moreover, teachers were encouraged to use the DVDs to prepare for their lessons and practice their own language skills. Once the teachers were confident with their own performance in the classroom, they were encouraged to deviate from the prescribed procedures and use the materials as they saw fit.

Trials have taken place in several schools to see how the Smooth Transitions materials are being accepted by students and teachers resulting in a large amount of data being collected by videoing teachers teaching in their classrooms; in addition to feedback sessions organised to motivate and encourage those participating in the various projects that were running at the time.

A video showing two students from Wat Muangkwak School, Amphur Muang, Lamphun completing their first attempt at Prathom one, page two can be seen at:

<http://www.steves-english-zone.com/primary-school-english-language-teachers.html>

Implications for Future Development

Katchen (2004) asks what types of new innovations there will be with the advent of the computer in relation to classroom dynamics. By having dialogues and conversation that are relevant to the curriculum, it means that a teacher with a good imagination can innovate their teaching with new ideas. The same material that has been used for the Smooth Transitions DVDs has been used in conjunction with SpeaKIT speech recognition software and is undergoing a trial at a rural ERIC Center (English Resources Instruction Center) in Bantatprachanukoon School which started in October 2010 (Graham 2010c).

This longitudinal study has been instigated to investigate the benefits of integrating video with speech recognition software to enhance the learning experience of primary school learners of English in Thailand. By having this project take place in an ERIC Center, it is hoped that there will be maximum coverage of the local area, as well as allowing different schools, clusters and districts, including other ERIC Centers to use the equipment and take part in the research.

The difference with this software compared to others used for education is that the computer tracks the way the speaker speaks and then assesses the speaker. Most other software products leave it up to the speaker to decide if their pronunciation is acceptable or not. Early indications are that students and teachers are positive about the concept of integrating the use of multi media and information technology into the Thai foreign language classroom.

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In addition, for the last year a series of trials using comics have been conducted at the Demonstration School, Udon Thani Rajabhat University; Wat Muangkwak School, Amphur Muang, Lamphun and Bantatprachanukoon School, Ban Phue district, Udon Thani. Once again the same conversations and dialogues were used; however, this time to make gap-fill activities and encourage the students to read and write.

The comics are made using a website by Bill Zimmerman called MakeBeliefsComix and can be found at: <http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/> allowing the production of the “Smooth Transitions” dialogues and conversations to be input in comic form and then published. The trials have been extremely successful and the students have been very quick to pick up the procedure in the classroom. Once the gap-fills have been completed, students can colour the characters and then have the opportunity to write the dialogues on lined paper. It was interesting to note that even though some students in the trial had never written English before, they were able to cope with an easy lesson from Prathom one. These comics have proved to be a motivating force for the students acting as a conduit for reading other types of text (Krashen 1993).

Slideshows and video showing the use of comics can be viewed at: <http://www.steves-english-zone.com/p-english.html> and <http://www.steves-english-zone.com/bantatprachanukoon-school.html>

Bill Zimmerman has agreed to allow the gap-fill and completed “Smooth Transitions” comics to be uploaded onto the internet for free download by teachers. This is a project that will take a considerable amount of time to achieve; however, it is anticipated that work will begin in February 2011 to have all six years of primary school comics ready for download by the end of 2011.

Conclusions

Pilot projects for “Smooth Transitions” have taken place in rural areas taking into account that the majority of students in Thailand live outside of Bangkok and other large cities and also to try to address, educationally, the problems that poverty and food insecurity have on education that hinders academic achievement, not just in Thailand, but throughout the world (Coles 2010). The level of English is very low in these areas, so the slightest intervention results in a massive improvement in the use of English. It has been accepted that one of the failings of this study is that there is no formal assessment and evaluation criteria; however, at conception, the intention of the project was to just “try to do some good and see where it takes us.” Having been successful informally and anecdotally, more formal assessment and evaluation will take place in the future using narrative enquiry based on ten feedback sessions with teachers from Bantatprachanukoon School.

It is important to note that as the name suggests, the “Smooth Transitions” DVDs have been designed to help teachers of English in primary schools adapt to the demands of the transition to student-centred communicative activities in line with the 1999 Education Act and the more recent demands of Curriculum 51. Having been educated in a teacher-centred environment themselves and then teaching for such a long time in that same style as they were taught themselves (Hayes 1995), a smooth transition is needed to give them the materials and support needed to find a pathway to EIL for Thailand’s young learners one step at a time.

These DVDs were made for a fraction of the budget that professional film-makers would have charged with their expertise and resources (Berman 2010); however, although they would be expected to produce a better quality DVD, it is debateable as to whether this would have made a difference to the students’ performance in the classroom. It is context and graded items following the curriculum that make the DVDs appealing to both students and teachers.

Having spent so much time working with Thai teachers of English in a rural context, the author finds himself calling into question the description of the Thai value system by Komin (1990), which has ego orientation as the leading value and achievement-task orientation as the last. These teachers who have attempted to change from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching have demonstrated a reversal of these orientations which, because they have turned out to be successful in their new teaching habits and styles, has subsequently led to an increase in status for those involved (Graham 2009b).

Thai teachers of English have responded positively with approximately 25,000 enquiries for downloads for the Prathom one to three DVDs on an Educational Service Area Office 4, Udon Thani province blog <http://www.sornor.org/?p=24> maintained by one of the supervisors Channarong Rachbuanoy, an original member of the first project team from Bantatprachanukoon School. If it was possible for MTV to be accepted in China (Fung 2006), then there is no reason why the use of “Smooth Transitions” English language DVDs should not be accepted in Thailand’s primary school classrooms in order to expose students to language used appropriately to support and contextualise their learning (Keene 2006). Only time will tell whether the Ministry of Education will be willing to investigate the possibility of using these resources in Thailand’s classrooms on a larger scale than at present.

The use of DVDs in the classroom is nothing new; however, what appears to be unravelling as a consequence of the various projects under the umbrella of “Smooth Transitions” is a series of innovations that uses English as an International Language whilst keeping to the national curriculum and making the context local, in order to keep the attention and interest of all concerned.

The aim for the future is to amalgamate all these materials as they are based on the national curriculum and use them in conjunction with a course book that follows the same content, such as Gogo Loves English. The materials have been designed for rural teachers in Thailand that have

not had the necessary training to teach English to use as a pathway to EIL for Thailand's young learners. Furthermore, trials will be undertaken over the coming years in other countries as it is believed that this experience can be used as a model for Asian neighbours who are looking for more personalised communicative English language teaching materials that are curriculum based in a context that students and teachers can relate to.

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