

## Improved English Language Skills Needed by Students Enrolled in Technical and Vocational Education in Thailand 4.0

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### **Abstract**

This article is concerned with 3 main issues: the need for improved English skills of Thai students and Technical and Vocational Education students in particular; the learning barriers facing them; and how their English proficiency can be developed to meet the demand of Thailand 4.0 in light of successive failures in English education reforms in Thailand in a realistic and pragmatic approach, based on an investigation of the findings of research projects available and empirical data collected from various sources.

**Keywords:** Improved English Language Skills, Technical and Vocational Education, Thailand 4.0

### **1. Introduction**

Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy and Thailand 4.0 Policy (the October 2016 - September 2021 plan), mapped out to develop the economy as a high-income country, will be achieved by reforming Thailand's education system. The new national development plan is expected to turn around the country's economy, heading toward the development of Thailand 4.0. Simply put, Thailand is set to build an English-speaking workforce; or another way round, the Thais 4.0 who must be English-proficient. This initiative is also clearly stated in Thailand's Technical and Vocational Education Mission on the World Technical and Vocational Education Data Base which reads, "The mission of Technical and Vocational Education in Thailand is to develop skilled and technical human resources and to ensure that Thailand continues to play an important role in the international labor and economic market."

It has also been reaffirmed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) article presented at the Thailand National Dialogue on the Future of Work held in March 2017, which stated that major reforms must be carried out in Thailand's education system in order to begin producing vast numbers of graduates with the ability and know-how to thrive in high-tech industries and multinational working environments.

The first objective on Agenda 1 for the development of Thais 4.0 is to reform education system by transforming learning ecosystem to purposeful learning, generative learning, mindful learning, and result-based learning, entails changes in goals and administration of the education system, teachers' skills and teaching paradigm, curriculum and teaching/learning methods [1].

So far, the country has gone through several cycles of education reform; nevertheless, Thai students' achievement measured by standardized tests at both the national and international levels has been disappointingly low. To avoid such disappointment, it is necessary for Thailand to persistently accelerate drastic changes in education reform by being consistently innovative. This requires growth mindsets, new skills set, new goals, new values, grit, self-regulation, self-control as well as making changes in a status quo that is morally, socially, economically and politically unsustainable.

Along these new directions for long-term development, Thailand has recently begun to integrate Technical and Vocational Education, together with key 21st Century Skills, into its education system in order to move beyond the “middle-income trap” and build a highly skilled workforce who able to compete in the ASEAN economic community [2].

Technical and Vocational Education by its nature promotes subject integration as many programs require students to integrate content from multiple subject areas [3], which calls for information literacy skills and English skills. Technical and Vocational Education students are encouraged to self-study and read extensively. Technical and Vocational Education contributes to sustainable development by empowering individuals, organizations, enterprises and communities and fostering employment, decent work and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning depends on information literacy skills, which is made possible by English proficiency.

This article draws attention to the problems that plague Thailand's education reform, and Improved English Language Skills Needed by Students Enrolled in Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Thailand 4.0 [2].

## 2. Thailand 4.0, Thais 4.0 and the Need for Improved English Skills

### 2.1 Thailand 4.0

Thailand 4.0 is enabled by modern information and communication technologies like the Internet of Things (IoT), Cyber-Physical Systems, big data analytics, cloud computing, high wireless networks and faster and mobile broadband networks.

According to IoT Agenda, IoT is a system of interrelated computing devices, mechanical and digital machines, objects, animals or people that are provided with unique identifiers and the ability to transfer data over a network without requiring human-to-human or human-to-computer interaction.

The term “Cyber-Physical Systems (CPS)” or “smart” systems is defined by IoT Agenda as co-engineered interacting networks of physical and computational components that provide the foundation of our critical infrastructure, form the basis of emerging and future smart services, and improve our quality of life in many areas. CPS will bring advances in personalized health care, emergency response, traffic flow management, and electric power generation and delivery, as well as in many other areas now just being envisioned. CPS and related CPS technologies include: IoT, Industrial Internet, Smart Cities, Smart Grid, “Smart” Anything (e.g., cars, buildings, homes, manufacturing, hospitals, appliances etc.). IBM defines the

term “Big data analytics” as the use of advanced analytic techniques against very large, diverse data sets that include different types such as structured/unstructured and streaming/batch, and different sizes from terabytes to zeta bytes.

Big data is a term applied to data sets which size or type is beyond the ability of traditional relational databases to capture, manage, and process the data with low-latency (with minimal delay). Big data comes from sensors, devices, video/audio, networks, log files, transactional applications, web, and social media - much of it generated in real time and in a very large scale.

According to IBM the term “Cloud computing”, often referred to as simply “the cloud,” is the delivery of on-demand computing resources—everything from applications to data centers—over the internet on a pay-for-use basis.

Regarding the Thailand 4.0 initiative, which was unveiled by the government on 1 July 2016, a survey was conducted by Dhurakij Pundit University to assess the Thai public’s opinion on the Thailand 4.0 initiative. According to the survey, only 4.84 percent of the respondents said that they know what Thailand 4.0 means.[3] Even though the Thai public’s perception of the Thailand 4.0 initiative remains not so clear for the time being, it is set to revolutionize the way Thais live, work learn and see the world. Additionally, the Thai government expects that by middle of this year the public and private sectors should start working together in the development of Thailand 4.0.

In a digital economy system, employers look for a workforce with the following skills: the ability to act independently and solve problems on their own; strong interpersonal written, oral, and social skills to collaborate with colleagues; strong global literacy to understand people around the world; the ability to acquire the information they need to do the job; and the ability to learn new skills as corporations change strategies to stay competitive. Such skills can be acquired, developed and updated by developing English Proficiency.

In this information-based, skills-intensive economy of the twenty-first century, the best jobs will be those requiring 21st Century Skills enabled by English Proficiency.

Thailand 4.0 has been designed to be developed along the 20-year national strategic plan comprising six areas, six primary strategies, and 4 supporting strategies as shown in Figure 1.

## 2.2 Thais 4.0

The Thai government has recently embarked upon a scheme to upgrade Thai people to a new category called Thais 4.0. Thai 4.0 should be equipped with ability to use technologies to gain knowledge, generate more income and communicate with other people across the globe.

According to the Thai government, the term “Thais 4.0” refers to a new breed of citizens equipped with essential knowledge and skills, social responsibility and capabilities to use digital tools and modern technologies, which is expected to be the driver of Thailand 4.0. Lt. Gen. Sansern Kaewkamnerd [4], government spokesman said, “These are people who can use technology to improve their incomes, create

jobs and build networks. They can also create innovations that can lead to production and improved productivity."



**Figure 1** Six areas of the 20-year National Strategic Plan.

This ambitious plan to develop Thais 4.0 is so closely intertwined with English education in Thailand and measures to improve Thailand's education model and the capabilities of its human resources.

### **2.3 The Need for Improved English Language Skills of Students Enrolled in Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Thailand 4.0**

Recent education reform efforts in Thailand have represented a departure from the traditional model of teaching and embarked upon constructivist/progressive practices designed to produce independent inquisitive life-long learners, who can utilize information literacy in acquiring a broad range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are recognized as indispensable in their studies as required by the world of work in the 21st century at the national and international levels.

In this direction, Thai students and the Thai workforce need to be equipped with improved English skills to build the above- mentioned capabilities. Since, English is the language of all information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, the language of science and technology, the vehicle for international communication, the language for international trade and business, the official language of ASEAN and the key to and success in the 21st century digital age.

In the information age, English is the common language. English education reforms in Thailand have failed to build up competencies in using the English language for communication and seeking knowledge from a multitude of resource centers.

This relationship between English and the utilization of technical resources for educational and economic purposes was highlighted by Dr. Witchit Srisa-an [5] at the Thailand TESOL conference in 1998.

He noted that in the future, due to the sheer volume of information available in English, "...it will not be possible to translate everything into our national language. The only practical alternative is to provide people with skills to directly access information in its original form..."

Thais are expected to be proficient in English in order to be successful and stay competitive within the ASEAN community and the international economy; yet English proficiency in Thailand falls far behind the proficiency levels among the neighboring countries of Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Singapore whereas in the small ASEAN member country Bhutan, with a population of 740,000, most of the subjects like mathematics, sciences and geography are taught in English. William Stanley [6], in his article "Education Reform in Thailand", noted that most of the technical people in Thailand do not have a full command of English.

The English Proficiency Index compiled by Switzerland-based education company "Education First" one of the most authoritative studies on English language abilities worldwide, revealed that Thailand retains its place in the "very low" English proficiency group together with Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Sri Lanka and Kazakhstan in Education First's 2017 report [7]. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) (2017), Thailand ranks 56th out of 72 surveyed countries, alongside other very low English proficiency nations such as Azerbaijan, Cambodia and Laos. On top of this, according to the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted in 2016, Thailand was ranked 54th among 72 other countries, including Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia – whereas Singapore performed best in the world and Vietnam came 8th in the rank (Table 1).

**Table 1** PISA 2015 Results in Focus – OECD.

**Program for international Student Assessment 2015**

Country Rank		Maths		Reading		Science	
		Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
<b>Top 12</b>							
Singapore	1	564	1	535	1	556	1
Japan	2	532	5	516	8	538	2
Estonia	3	520	9	519	6	534	3
Taiwan	4	542	4	497	23	532	4
Finland	5	511	13	526	4	531	5
Macao	6	544	3	509	12	529	6
Canada	7	516	10	527	3	528	7
Vietnam	8	495	22	487	33	525	8
Hong Kong	9	548	2	527	2	523	9
China	10	531	6	494	27	518	10
South Korea	11	524	7	517	7	516	11
New Zealand	12	495	21	509	10	513	12
United States	25	470	41	497	24	496	25
Others ASEAN							
Malaysia	45	446	45	431	50	443	47
Thailand	54	415	57	409	61	421	58
Indonesia	62	386	67	397	68	403	66

Source: The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [8].

*Note: Only 5 ASEAN countries participated in 2015 survey*

Additionally, the services sector in Thailand, there has been a shortage of workers with English proficiency, soft skills and sufficient science and engineering and technical skills.

The total written knowledge in the world is said to have doubled between 1450 and 1750, and then to have doubled again between 1750 and 1900. Between 1900 and 1950, human knowledge doubled once more, and then again from 1950 to 1975. Now, it is believed to double every 900 days. By the year 2020, global knowledge is predicted to double every 72 days. To be successful and effective, Technical and Vocational Education students need to improved English Language Skills in their studies and to keep up with the quantum leaps being made in all areas of knowledge which available in English [9].

### **3. Developing English Language Proficiency of Students Enrolled in Technical and Vocational Education in Thailand 4.0**

In Thailand, it should make clear that English language is a vehicle that is used globally and will lead to more opportunities, and that it belongs to anyone who uses it. It should not be labeled as “the language of the oppressor” as understood in the light of cultural relativism, sociocentrism and ethnocentrism.

This can be well understood when the former Education Minister, Chinnaworn Boonyakiat, cancelled a plan to make English the second language of Thailand because he thought the world might think that Thailand was once under colonial rule [6].

In order to develop English Language Proficiency of Technical and Vocational Education students along the realization of Thailand 4.0, it is good to begin with building positive or receptive learners' perceptions of English.

A shared vision of the desired levels and areas of English proficiency of English Language Learners (ELLs) should be clearly defined and understood by those involved.

Proficiency refers to functional language ability at various levels and has to do with the levels of real world usage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing situations.

Empirical data analysis has shown that English education in Thailand has placed little emphasis on English speaking skills development; students have long been taught mainly to read and write English.

Today, much more persistent and consistent efforts and cooperation are needed to help ELLs acquire oral proficiency (speaking and listening) as most of them have little to no functional ability to speak English whereas their proficiency with literacy (reading and writing) is still discouraging.

This article recommends that English education should ensure that Technical and Vocational Education students can acquire English proficiency at the level equivalent to Level 4 or 5 according to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale.

### **3.1 English Learning Barriers Facing Thai Students**

Teachers, educators and researchers have long been trying in different ways to identify the real reasons why most Thais lack interest in learning English and fail to acquire English proficiency. Nevertheless, their efforts have in large part yielded ambiguous results.

The real reasons are related to the following list of barriers facing Thai learners - especially Thai Technical and Vocational Education students: the thought process and perception of Thai learners; gritty leadership; apathy; a lack of critical thinking; personal and social values; self-esteem, lack of confidence; misinformation; misuse and mismanagement of time and resources; indiscretion; unproductive prioritization of tasks; cultural relativism and a higher feeling of personal and national respect; sociocentrism and ethnocentrism; the notion of English as a language of oppression; the fear of losing face and being laughed at and of making mistakes; shyness and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), also known as social phobia; limited contact time with foreign teachers; limited or no exposure to English outside of the classroom; a limited opportunity to practice English out of class; the traditional model of teaching and learning; teacher's inadequate knowledge of English and teaching methodology; resistance to self-improvement and change; educator's unresponsiveness to education reform; Inconsistency of English Language curriculum and management; and the lack of persistent and consistent political.

### **3.2 Developing the English Language Skills of Thai Technical and Vocational Education students**

According to the desire of politicians and the education ministry for Thailand to become a knowledge-based society, together with the definition of education in the National Education Act 1999, as well as including knowledge building, Thai Technical and Vocational Education students must be equipped with the ability to communicate clearly, concisely and logically in English. Apart from international curriculum schools and academic institutions that follows English or international curriculum, decades of English education reforms in Thailand, into which huge amounts of money have been injected, has never been the right remedy the country has been hoping for.

Today, the time has come for innovative action to dismantle any damaging, traditional thinking that holds back students from acquiring the English proficiency they need in the 21st century, otherwise, we would be doing students a disservice if we were still afraid to change. It is worth to be reminded that Thailand's English Education should be designed to instill in Thai students a burning desire to learn English like what was demonstrated in the life Mr. Jack Ma, the executive chairman of the Alibaba Group [10]. Regarding the ability to adapt to change, Singapore is one of the best examples of a country that plucked up enough courage to embark on a series of reforms [11].

In the wake of the 1997, Asian financial crisis, Singapore enabled by its gritty leadership and secret MPH formula (the three key principles of meritocracy, pragmatism and honesty), fearlessly began its most successful series of reforms, with the adoption of a new educational vision, 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation', which emphasized innovation, creativity and lifelong learning [11].

Today, Singapore is the world's most successful society, driven by its English-speaking workforce. This introduces an overview of an alternative to the development of English language skills for Thai Technical and Vocational Education students in a realistic and pragmatic approach in the following framework: [11]

1. General guidelines
2. Learning Center/ Learning Support Center/ Academic Learning Center – Online Academic Services (e.g. “English for Technical and Vocational Education Services” – Thailand )
3. Responsibilities of teachers
4. Responsibilities of students
5. Use of Technology in English Language Teaching and Learning
6. English-Speaking Village Stay/English Homestay

### **General guidelines**

It is expected that Thai Technical and Vocational Education students will continuously develop their English language communication skills; be facilitated in this development by teachers and staffs; and be highly articulate in English by the time they graduate. This will be achieved through effective instructional intervention on the part of teaching personnel or staff according to the following steps: integrating information on the institution's English language development expectations and assistance into materials distributed to students; incorporating English language assessment and development activities into academic programs; being alert to students' needs for additional English language development; and referring students to the Learning Support Center services.

### **Learning Support Center services**

The Learning Support Center services to be run by Student Services will facilitate students to develop skills and techniques for independent, articulate, life-long learning with a variety of interactive face-to-face sessions, online and hard copy resources and electronic communication modes to improve student learning experience in collaboration with staff across and outside the institution to promote excellence in teaching and learning through joint teaching, research projects and community service.

The Learning Support Center website (purpose to build website in English and Thai), together with the English Language Corner, will provide adequate information and downloadable resources for students and staff. The English Language Corner will be developed to foster English language skills development.

### **Responsibilities of teachers**

Professional and academic staff members will be expected to perform the following duties: identify and assess the level of student's need for English language skills development; provide students with relevant English language skills training; and, advise students of their responsibilities for English language development.

Staff members involved in the development of curricula and syllabus and co-ordinate academic programs will be expected to ensure that each level contains clear language objectives, adequate standards-

relevant content areas and requirements and that pedagogical effectiveness as well as quantity and quality of engagement can be achieved.

### **Responsibilities of students**

Students need to accept the major responsibility for their English language development and take an active learning approach to developing their skills.

Students are responsible for identifying when they need assistance to improve their English language communication skills, pro-actively seeking out the services and resources available to help them, and applying what they learn

Students will be expected to:

- have the level of their English language competency increased throughout their studies
- determine their English language communication development goals, evaluate their progress and ask for assistance when in need
- participate in all learning activities stipulated
- follow advice on improving their English language skills

### **Use of Technology in English Language Teaching and Learning**

Technology can be fully utilized to help teachers and learners to do make language development possible. Technology and information literacy makes learning much easier and more successful in any kind of setting: in formal schools; in post-school vocational training institutions; in enterprises and everywhere. However, it takes English proficiency and information literacy, (or even information and digital fluency) for Technical and Vocational Education teachers and students to be successful. The mission of Technical and Vocational Education in Thailand is to develop skilled and technical human resources and to ensure that Thailand continues to play an important role in the international labor and economic market.

As Erling [12] mentioned that there are strong demands for English across society because of its perceived economics and social value in South Asia. There are also several policy initiatives and interventions that promote English language learning programmes as part of skills development. While skills development and English language teaching are in high demand, there are issues about how this demand can be met. In to investment, this report explores the evidence that exists about the relationship between education, English language skills, skills development and economic development [12].

To produce more meaningful and deep learning experiences, teachers should be encouraged to have the teaching and learning process enhanced by modern technology including a computer-based interactive communication process which includes the use of text, audio, and graphics and animations.

The Learning Support Center services, together with the English Language Corner mentioned above, should be designed and developed with advance technology to facilitate teaching and learning in every context including in Mobile Learning as well. Access to related academic and related websites should be made available; and social media and mobile technologies should be utilized to help students acquire English proficiency.

### **English-Speaking Village Stay/English Homestay**

A stay at an English-speaking village (or the like) by visiting students should be encouraged in order to get exposed to real-life situations where they can practice English speaking with foreigners.

### **4. Conclusion**

Building an English-speaking workforce or the Thais 4.0 who must be English-proficient, calls for a strategic plan that places top priority on sustainable capacity development and education with an emphasis on English proficiency in a realistic and pragmatic approach. It is going to take a new mindset, innovative leadership, a new culture, a new strategy and persistent courage to change and achieve a drastic, pragmatic breakthrough in developing English proficiency in Thai Technical and Vocational Education students as well as in national development. Meanwhile the learning barriers facing Thai Students mentioned earlier must be taken into consideration and dealt with to pave the way for effective teaching and learning.

It is our hope that the overview of an alternative to the development of English language skills of Thai TVET students that we have introduced will shed some light on the issues in question and rekindle interest in this field as well as to stimulate further efforts to develop English-speaking Thais 4.0.

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