

English skills for AEC communication:

A challenge for Thai universities

Kantatip Sinhaneti, Shinawatra University, Thailand

Wei Fu, Shinawatra University, Thailand

***Abstract:** ASEAN member countries are rapidly approaching a new milestone to be a single market at the end of 2015. Thailand has an ambition to be the hub for international education among ASEAN countries. English skills become more important for Thailand when AEC is fully implemented. This paper is based on a study from 16 Thai higher institutions, which offer Bachelor and Master degree programs to improve students' communication skills in English. The results show that they offer 57 listening and speaking courses and 83 reading and writing courses under those Bachelor programs. Among the programs offered, only one university offers English for Everyday and Social Communication course. They offer a few courses under master level programs to enhance students' 21st century skills and professional development. From such findings, lacking English communication skills courses will be a big problem for Thai workers to meet the AEC market needs. Perhaps, it's a great challenge for Thai universities to orchestrate some changes in ELT curricula to provide more English skills courses for real life communication, especially to cater for the AEC market.*

***Key words:** AEC, English Skills, Challenge, Thai higher education*

1. Introduction

ASEAN member countries are rapidly approaching a new milestone to be a single market at the end of 2015. It will be more important than ever for Thais to develop their 21st century and English language skills to compete with the new intercultural workplace. Thailand has an ambition to be the hub for international education among ASEAN countries. In 2006 the OHEC issued the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Thailand (TQF) specifying five domains of learning: Ethical and moral development, knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibility, and analytical and communication skills. In 2011, Thailand has launched its Second Decade of Education Reform with principal strategies reflecting the intention of the government to harness the potential of information and communication technology to build the capacity of Thai students, enabling a culture of knowledgeable use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and communication for the development of future education (UNESCO, 2011). The main objective of the education reform is to foster the students achieve 21st century skills,

such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, learning to learn and AEC communication skills, in order to fully implement the AEC needs. As The Nation (2012) reported,

The AEC represents both a huge challenge and opportunity for Thailand and its people to move up the economic ladder with more skill intensive industries. However, those exceptional opportunities can only be realized if Thailand makes the commitment to enhance significantly the quality of its human capital and the productivity of its people.

2. Preparing for AEC Communication

The Ministry of Education plays a significant role on preparing for AEC. It must be noted that the Ministry of Education has orchestrated a lot of projects to increase Thai students English communication skills, ASEAN awareness and professional qualifications. In preparation for the AESAN Community, the office of the Basic Education Commission is developing professional English courses for poor students who have few opportunities to continue their studies after finishing the lower secondary education level. Also, the Ministry of Education has initiated an elaborated plan “Let learn English” to encourage Thai citizens both in urban and countryside and skilled vocational students to improve their English proficiency that can communicate with neighbor ASEAN countries (The Nation, 2012). Thai government declared 2012 as English Speaking Year with an aim of encouraging teacher and students to communicate in English every Monday plus various English activities to improve students English language skills. In additional, the Ministry of Education was allocated over 500 million baht to improve the English proficiency among the students, especially those attending vocational schools (The Nation, 2014). The Ministry of Education encourages schools in Thailand to formulate “ASEAN Curriculum”, which was initiated by the Southeast Asian Minister of Education Organization (SEAMEO) with five themes as follows: 1) “Knowing ASEAN”, 2) Valuing “Identity and Diversity ”, 3) “Connecting Global and Local ”, 4) “Promoting Equity and Justice ”, 5) “Working Together for a Sustainable Future” (ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebook, 2012). In order to improve professional qualifications and skills, from 2005 to 2012, Thai government signed Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) to offer 8 standard occupations, which are medicine, dentistry, nursing, engineering, accounting, architecture, surveying and hospitality & tourism (ASEAN, 2013). In additional, the Ministry of Education (MoE) of Thailand established a new Basic Education Curriculum B.E 2551(A.D. 2008) of Thailand, which was based on the Framework of Education Model in the 21st century focusing on 21st century content, life skills, learning and thinking skills. The 21st century skills are as known as the follows: 1) communication capability 2) thinking capability 3) problem solving capability 4) capability in applying life skills and 5) capability in technological application (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007).

Moreover, ASEAN research centers, both at private and public universities to be responsible for service providing and promote cooperation in terms of research and training programs, are springing up everywhere, such as ASEAN Studies Centre at

Chulaongkorn University and Thammasat University. University of Thai Chamber of Commerce established AEC Strategy Center to be business advisor and business matching and training for business entrepreneurs, while Kasetsat University established Asia Market Expertise Center or AMEC to develop research in ASEAN market to establish Marketing Labs and Center and promote collaboration in such field in their local and international market network on top of offering a training certificate for Asia Market Professional: AMP (Kantatip, 2012). Five Thai universities joined the ASEAN University Network (AUN) in November 1995 with main objective to strengthen the existing network of co-operation among leading universities in ASEAN. Recently, The AUN held AEC Forum ‘Fostering University Industry Partnership for the AEC’ on Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and 5th Head of international Relations Meeting on Peking University, Beijing, China (AUN, 2015).

According the report by Thailand Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy Framework (2011-2020) (Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, 2011),

In 2020, Thailand will have smart development, with a knowledge- and wisdom-based economy and society. Every person will have equal opportunity in taking part in the development process, which will lead to balanced and sustainable growth.

3. English Education Situation

This paper is based on a study from 16 Thai higher institutions, which offer Bachelor and Master degree programs to improve students’ communication skills in English and professional development and 21st century skills. Bachelor of Business English Communication program (some universities offer as Business English) and Bachelor of English Communication program are selected to analysis English communication skills courses. Master degree in Communicative English program, Master degree in English for Professional and International Communication program, Master degree in Professional English Media Studies and Master degree in English for Careers program are selected to analysis English language skills and professional development and 21st century skills courses. The research uses descriptive statistics to group the primarily data as follows:

Table 1: Number of English language skills courses under Business English Communication & English Communication Programs

Type of university	Business English Communication Program		English Communication Program	
	Listening and Speaking skills	Reading and Writing skills	Listening and Speaking skills	Reading and Writing skills
Public University	14	18	9	11
Private University	22	40	12	14

Table 1 shows Thai private universities offer 22 listening and speaking courses, and 40 reading and writing courses under the Business English Communication programs (some of the universities offer as Business English), while public universities offer 14 listening and speaking courses and 18 reading and writing courses. Thai public universities offer 9 listening and speaking courses, and 11 reading and writing courses under the English Communication programs, while private universities offer 12 listening and speaking courses and 14 reading and writing courses. Both public and private universities offer more reading and writing courses than listening and speaking courses under Business English Communication and English Communication programs.

Under English Communication programs, only Chiang Mai Rajabhat University offers “English for Everyday Communication” and “English for Social Communication” courses to develop students’ communication skills. Maharakham University, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University and Payap University offer “Public Speaking or Presentation” courses to improve students speaking and presentation skills. Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Maharakham University, Payap University and Kasem Bundit University offer “Phonetics and Phonology” courses to train students’ better English pronunciation to communicate with other neighbor AEC countries. Payap University and Maharakham University offer “Listening” courses in enhancing students’ listening skills. Only Payap University offers “Small Group Communication” course to help students’ achieve communication skills in groups. All of the selected universities offer various writing and reading courses focusing on paragraph and creative writing, academic and research writing, reading techniques and skills.

Under Business English Communication programs, Uttaradit Rajabhat University, Thammasat University, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Dhonburi Rajabhat University, Asian University, Assumption University, Sripatum University and St Theresa International College offer “Public Speaking or Business Presentation” courses to develop students speaking and presentation skills at work places. Uttaradit Rajabhat University, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Assumption University, Bangkok University, Dhurakij Phundit University and St Theresa International College offer “Pronunciation” courses in enhancing students’ communication with perfect English pronunciation. Only Chiang Mai Rajabhat University offers “English for Everyday Communication” and “English for Social Communication” courses to develop students’ communication skills. Whereas, Dhurakij Phundit University, Sripatum University and St Theresa International College offer “Oral Communication or Speech Communication” courses to improve students communication skills. Thammasat University, Assumption University, Bangkok University and St Theresa International College offer “Listening” courses to train students’ listening skills. All of the selected universities offer a lot of reading and writing courses on business- oriented, critical and analytical, and special topic reading and writing.

Table 1 indicates that both Business English Communication and English Communication programs in Thailand universities offer more reading and writing courses than listening and speaking courses. Only one university offers “English for Everyday Communication” course to develop Thai students’ communication skills in English. There are not enough communicative courses for Thai students to improve

their English communication skills.

Table 2:
Number of English and other skills courses under Master English programs

Name of university	Name of Program	English Skills Courses		Other Skills Courses
		General English Courses	ESP English Courses	
Rakhamhaeng University	MA in Communicative English	4	2	5
National Institute of Development Administration	MA in Language and Communication	5	2	16
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi	MA in English for Professional and International Communication	2	2	10
Assumption University	MA in Professional English Media Studies	1	6	10
Dhurakij Pundit University	MA in English for Careers	4	2	9
Thammasat University	MA in English for Careers	4	9	8

Table 2 shows 6 Thai universities offer various Master English programs. Only Assumption University offers MA in Professional English Media Studies program. The researcher is divided the English courses into two groups: 1) English skills courses: general English and ESP for English for specific purposes courses; 2) other skills courses include professional development, 21st century skills courses.

Rakhamhaeng University, Dhurakij Pundit University and Thammasat University offer 4 general English courses to improve students' English reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. National Institute of Development Administration offers 5 general English courses, while King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi offers 2 general English. Assumption University only offers 1 general English course to

develop students' English proficiency.

Rakhamhaeng University, National Institute of Development Administration, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi and Dhurakij Pundit University offer 2 ESP courses. Assumption University offers 6 ESP courses, while Thammasat University offers 9 courses.

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi and Assumption University offer 10 other courses to help students' Learning and Innovation Skills and Information, Media and Technology Skills and other professional development skills. Dhurakij Pundit University offers 9 other courses, while Thammasat University offers 8 courses to develop students' Life and Career Skills. Rakhamhaeng University offers 5 other courses, whereas National Institute of Development Administration offers 16 courses to improve students' Communication Capacity, Thinking Capacity and Problem-Solving Capacity and other professional development skills.

4. Overcoming challenges for Thai universities:

In Thailand, the students need to improve their English language skills. But there are not enough courses for them to take so as to improve those skills, especially communication skills. Thai students' English-language skills rank below those of youngsters in at least three other member countries of ASEAN, according to a recent survey by Education First (EF). An international language school ranked Thailand 42nd out of 44 countries surveyed for adult English proficiency -- below Vietnam (39), and Indonesia (34), with Malaysia being the top ASEAN country at No 9. The Office of the Education Council (ONEC), which revealed the results of the survey, said the level of English proficiency of Thai youth is below par and cannot compete with other countries (Bangkok Post, 27 July 2012). A research result from Chulalongkorn University Language Institution (CULI) claimed that Thais' weakness in speaking skills was a main concern of the society and suggested to offer more English speaking activities in classroom and in increasing contacts with foreigners to improve the students' speaking skills. Thai students have difficulty in communication in English especially in speaking (Richard 2002; Josiane 2012). English skills shouldn't be limited to only large corporations and hotels; traffic cops and vendors should learn it as well (Suthiya, 2012). Learning English requires the learner to be able to speak it in an understandable manner with correct grammar and pronunciation (Suthiya, 2012). The Ministry of Education had already launched the English Speaking Year 2012 campaign, which involves teachers conducting various activities in schools to let students practice speaking English. More student exchange programs and scholarships should be funded as well (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2012).

As for the higher education challenges and problems in higher education, the Ministry of Education Thailand (2013) stated that, Thailand's goal of integration into the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015 provides a strong motivation for the timely and efficient development of the Thai National Quality Framework (Choomnoon, 2011). The launch of the AEC will turn the ASEAN region into a single market with a free flow of commodities, services, investment and labor. This is expected to boost

regional competitiveness as well as cooperation, facilitating the sharing of educational resources and the development of common educational standards. During the past decade, Thailand has accumulated problems of education for development that could be classified into four dimensions: quantitative, qualitative, efficiency, and effectiveness (Wichit, 2005).

In the 21st century, everyone should try to acquire 21st century skills, such as Global awareness; Financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; Health and wellness awareness; Critical-thinking and problem-solving skills; Communication skills; Creativity and innovation skills; Collaboration skills; Information and media literacy skills and so on (Chris Dede, 2009). Chris Dede (2009) pointed that the education should pay more attentions to personal development. Meanwhile, in Thailand higher institutions there were only two “Master degree for Professional Development” programs. The information from ASEAN Secretariat News (24 January, 2013) shares a similar idea that “Secretary-General of ASEAN emphasized the importance of education; science, technology and innovation; and youth program as ways to learn, practice and improve ASEAN students’ English competency.” It is urgent to offer those programs for Thai citizens to enhance they personal development in order to achieve the Free Labor Market goal of AEC.

The higher education system is more internationalized “bringing the Thai education system to the international standard as well as making Thailand the country of higher education destination for Southeast Asia” according to Kirtikara (2001, p. 9). But Kavi (2013) pointed that the lack of English ability was the big threat for Thailand internationalized prognosis. English skills are the vital point to Thai higher education when AEC is fully implemented; language-wise. Thai workers are fully in danger of not being competitive because of the lack of communication skills. “Many jobs will not even be open to Thais because they will not have the needed language ability simply to search for them” (Bangkok Post, 2012).

Further more, only one private university offered one “Master degree in English for Media” program. An article “The AEC Industry’s Guide to Using Social Medial to Increase Business, Promote Loyalty and Improve Customer Service” shared the idea that online social media allows companies to increase business, promote loyalty and improve customer service, especially in the concrete industry. It is the time to implement social media techniques. The more you know and can manage, the better you are able to control your online reputation. Key to success is facilitating the conversation, inviting feedback, conversing with key targets and monitoring content (Constructive Communication, 2015). Another article “Social Medial for AEC” share the same idea that only 28% of AEC professionals use social media for marketing and publicity purposes. There is a great opportunity right now to position your AEC firm as an industry thought leader (Industrial Brand, 2015). Thai higher institutions must offer more Media related international programs; otherwise they cannot maximize the market needs.

To sum up, under those programs that are offered by Thai higher institutions, there are not enough communicative language skills courses under the bachelor level. Also, at master level, only a few programs and courses are offered to help students to

acquire 21st Century skills and the courses under those programs are not relevant either. Thai higher institution should reform curriculum in current programs and offer more programs to suit the AEC market needs.

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