

# **Reshaping ELT in Thailand: Reconsidering curriculum design through reflective writing**

**Sirinit Chanawong**

## **บทคัดย่อ**

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสรุปสาระสำคัญของพระราชบัญญัติการศึกษาแห่งชาติ และวิเคราะห์โครงสร้างพื้นฐานของหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ โดยบรรยายถึงบทบาทของครูและผู้เรียนตามนโยบายการปฏิรูปการศึกษาแห่งชาติ ตลอดจนประเด็นปัญหาที่พบในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ นอกจากนี้ ยังมุ่งเสนอแนวทางในการปรับปรุงพัฒนาโครงสร้างหลักสูตรโดยการใช้การเขียนสะท้อนคิด (Reflective Writing) เป็นเครื่องมือในการทบทวนและวิเคราะห์ตนเอง รวมถึงสถานการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้นจริงในการเรียนการสอน และเสนอแนะให้ครูและผู้เรียนใช้การเขียนสะท้อนคิดเพื่อสะท้อนบทบาท ความสำเร็จ และปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นจริงในห้องเรียน เพื่อนำข้อมูลที่ได้ไปประกอบการพิจารณาทบทวนแก้ไขหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศต่อไป

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the framework of the Thailand's National Education Act in order to figure out how the English as a Foreign Language curriculum in Thailand is formed. It also focuses on teachers and learners' expected roles in the Education Reform as well as the constraints arising from implementing the national curriculum framework. Reflective writing which is a process of reviewing one's own behavior and idea can be used for negotiating curriculum. This is because through the process of reflection both teachers and learners can (1) look back at an event that has been done; (2) analyze the event or ideas by thinking in-depth from different perspectives

and explaining; and (3) think carefully about the events or ideas and ongoing progress. As it involves the process of critical thinking which is composed of both cognitive and metacognitive processes, reflective practice can reveal the constraints or successful aspects of the curriculum which would be beneficial for those who have authority in policy and curriculum design. In particular, the paper suggests that reflective writing is an effective tool for reconsidering curriculum design and reshape the ELT curriculum in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Curriculum design ELT in Thailand Reflective Writing

## **Introduction**

Along 50 years, since 1961, Thailand has used the National Economic and Social Development Plan as a model for developing the country. Before that period of time, the main aim of the country's development was economy, and the organization of the plan for development was likely to be a top-down process. That is, the community development policy was established by the government with lack of community participation in decision making. As a result, the development inputs neither corresponded to what a community actually needed nor fit into a variety of community contexts. To change this circumstance, the National Economic and Social Development Plan was established and has been used to this day.

However, around 1997, Thailand faced the economic, political, cultural, and social crisis. This caused concern to develop human resources in response to global competition. To do so, the urgent need to reform Thai education was raised, and the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999), effective in August 1999, was established. The Act focuses on changing Thai educational norms, for example, by substituting a teacher-centered or a traditional lecture-based method of instruction with a more

creative approach aiming to develop learners' capacity for creative and critical thinking. The Act also offers freedom for individual teachers and institutions to construct their own curriculum. Above all, the Act lines on the principles of lifelong education and aims to develop all aspects of life—physical and mental health, intelligence, knowledge, goodness, integrity, and living happily with other people. The Act specifies the learning process as follows: The learning process shall aim at inculcating sound awareness of politics; democratic system of government under constitutional monarchy; ability to protect and promote their rights, responsibilities, freedom, respect of the rule of law, equality, and human dignity; pride in Thai identity; ability to protect public and national interests; promotion of religion, art, national culture, sports, local wisdom, Thai wisdom and universal knowledge; inculcating ability to preserve natural resources and the environment; ability to earn a living; self-reliance; creativity; acquiring thirst for knowledge and capability of self-learning on a continuous basis.” (Chapter 1, Section 7).

Successfully implementing the Act takes time and effort. Therefore, in order to effectively implement the Act, there was Thailand's First Education Reform (1997-2007), and the Second Reform was established by 2009-2018. There has been both success and failure of the reform attempts. In particular, the Office of the Educational Council or OEC (2009) reveals that teacher development is the key to the success of the Education Reform. That is, reforming teachers should be the first priority of education reform. In the knowledge-based society, teachers play a significant role in promoting students' self-development by providing a resource and suggestion for them. At the same time, teachers should have a well-rounded education themselves. Instructions or illustrations should be integrated and correspond to current situations in the real world. Also, there should be a clear objective of teacher development whether to develop academic content standards or a teaching and learning process.

Importantly, there should be a change in a teacher's vision and thinking skill. However, while the country needs to implement new teaching and learning approaches, there have been not many in-service teacher training programs. Most of them are held in the city outside school (Puntumasen. 2002). As a result, teachers may find it difficult to participate in such programs. Therefore, as Kaewdang (2002) suggested, educational institutions should find an effective and sustainable training for in-service teachers.

In doing so, educators and scholars who are responsible for the reform need to be aware of the four main issues: (1) there should be a clear cut policy directive to specify what teachers in the next ten years are expected to be in order to design what the curriculum should be and how to teach and learn; (2) to reform is not to solve a problem or to find the solutions, but it is to develop and create a new innovative process; (3) educators and scholars should change the way they think about education and should adopt integrative thinking in order to find the answer to how to connect education with other aspects of life; and (4) the education system in Thailand including the curriculum, subject matter, and assessment, all of which should be up to date in corresponding to what learners are expected to be. Even though the Strategic Plan for Reform of Teachers and Educational Personnel (2004-2013) which focuses on School-Based Training (The Office of the Secretariat of the Prime Minister, 2004) was approved by the Ministry of Education, there is still a question of what teachers would perceive or react to the policy.

Apart from teachers, Thailand's educational system should offer opportunity for students to design their own learning paths. Education in the future should provide a learning community for Thai students. The Office of Educational Commission has carried out research and development on learner-centered instruction which aims to promote learners' self-learning according to their potential.

However, especially in English language teaching (ELT), most Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers still used a traditional grammar-translation method which is a teacher-centered approach focusing on grammar structures, vocabulary, and reading (Maskhao, 2002). In order to implement a learner-centered approach which aims to create a life-long education and self-learning system, teachers need to change their teaching methods and transform themselves from 'tellers' to 'facilitators' and from 'materials users' to 'teaching materials creators' (Nonkukhetkhong, 2006).

The real teaching and learning situation in Thailand highlights the need to reform not only the role of teachers and learners, but also the curriculum. This is because the curriculum is the content and process of gaining knowledge and developing skills (Doll, 1996). Reshaping curriculum can reshape the learning contents and the role of teachers and learners. Moreover, it can produce a high-achieving learning environment where all students are accepted, challenged, and able to develop themselves to be productive, responsible, and ethical citizens. Means and Knapp (1991) suggest that the curriculum should be based on the three principles: (1) focus on complex, meaningful problems; (2) embed instruction on the basic skill in the context of more global tasks; (3) make connections with students' out-of-school experience and culture. However, the national curriculum needs to be explicit so that learners and practitioners know what the learning content and expected performance look like. To design the most appropriate curriculum, instructional councils (curriculum councils, educational development councils, joint committees, professional study committee, etc.) who make decision in curriculum and instruction should negotiate for instruments that will help teachers to facilitate learning goals. Each learner has to be considered as an individual so that the teacher can design a learning material and environment which are appropriate for an individual's needs (Becker, 1981). Apart from instructional councils, teachers and

learners should also engage in curriculum negotiation. Breen and Littlejohn (2000) suggest three types of negotiation in learning process. Personal interactive negotiation deals with negotiating with oneself about what one is learning while interactive negotiation happens when teachers and students communicate with each other in order to confirm meaning. In negotiating curriculum, procedural negotiation can be used to make an agreement between a teacher and learners on a future process of a classroom. That is, students can discuss or work together with a teacher in designing purposes, content, activities, and evaluation.

Reflective writing is an effective means for negotiating and reshaping curriculum. According to Moon (1999), reflection is done in order to consider the process of one's own learning, critical review own behavior and others', build theory from observation, engage in self-development, make decisions, and empower oneself. Jone and Shelton (2006) also point out that through reflective writing the writer can examine, clarify, and crystallize thoughts and ideas in his or her mind. Therefore, reflective writing provides teachers and learners an opportunity to think about the school context, their roles, and the contents they teach and learn. Reflection can be a tool to provide understanding of successful and unsuccessful aspects and types of feedbacks both learners and teachers actually have in implementing the National curriculum. In particular, comments and proposed ways for improvement reflected by learners themselves may help shaping curriculum and pedagogies by lessening teachers' difficulty in choosing appropriate language aspects to focus on (Leow. 1998; Roberts. 1995; Schmidt. 1995; Seedhouse. 2001).

### **The Current National Curriculum**

The National Economic and Social Development Plan yields an effect on the National Scheme of Education and the National Development Plan. In

particular, policy and objectives of Thai education are based on the National Education Act of 1999. According to the Act, education provision shall be based on: (1) lifelong education for all; (2) all segments of society participating in the provision of education; and (3) continuous development of the bodies of knowledge and learning processes. In 78 sections of the Act, there are interesting issues which can provide an overview of how the current national curriculum policy in Thailand is formed.

### ***Educational System***

According to National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and Amendments (Second National Education Act B.E. 2545 (2002)), there shall be three types of education: formal, non-formal, and informal (Chapter 3, Section 15). In general, a type of education which has a high impact on the National Curriculum in Thailand is formal education which is divided into two levels: basic education and higher education. Twelve-year basic education is provided in school before higher education which is provided in university or other institutions is divided into lower-than-degree level and degree level (Chapter 3, Section 16).

### ***National Education Guidelines***

In every type of education, according to Chapter 4, Section 22, education shall be based on the principle that all learners are capable of learning. Particularly, the focus is put on learners' self-development. Therefore, it is suggested that each individual learner should be supported to arrive their own development path based on what they want to do and what they can do. The emphasis of every type of education shall be on knowledge, morality, learning process, and integration of the following aspects:

- (1) Knowledge about oneself and the relationship between oneself and society, namely: family, community, nation, and world community; as well as knowledge about the historical development of the Thai society and matters relating to politics and democratic system of government under a constitutional monarchy;
- (2) Scientific and technological knowledge and skills, as well as knowledge, understanding and experience in management, conservation, and utilization of natural resources and the environment in a balanced and sustainable manner;
- (3) Knowledge about religion, art, culture, sports, Thai wisdom, and the application of wisdom;
- (4) Knowledge and skills in mathematics and languages, with emphasis on proper use of the Thai language;
- (5) Knowledge and skills in pursuing one's career and capability of leading a happy life (pp. 10-11).

Because of the focus on these five aspects of knowledge and self-development, the learning process shall be organized by concerning whether the activities, thinking process, subject matter, and environment are appropriate for each individual learner. Educational institutions shall

- (1) provide substance and arrange activities in line with the learners' interests and aptitudes, bearing in mind individual differences;
- (2) provide training in thinking process, management, how to face various situations and application of knowledge for obviating and solving problems;



- (3) organize activities for learners to draw from authentic experience; drill in practical work for complete mastery; enable learners to think critically and acquire reading habit and continuous thirst for knowledge;
- (4) achieve, in all subjects, a balanced integration of subject matter, integrity, values, and desirable attributes;
- (5) enable instructors to create the ambiance, environment, instructional media and facilities for learners to learn and be all-round persons, able to benefit from research as part of the learning process. In so doing, both learners and teachers may learn together from different types of teaching-learning media and other sources of knowledge;
- (6) enable individuals to learn at all times and in all places. Co-operation with parents, guardians, and all parties concerned in the community shall be sought to develop jointly the learners in accord with their potentiality (pp. 11-12).

As learners' self-development is the main focus of education, an assessment is focused on each individual learner's capacity. To assess learners' performance, apart from the results of the tests, learners shall be assessed through observation of their development; personal conduct; learning behavior; participation in activities (Chapter 4, Section 26). Regarding curriculum design, curricular substance shall be related to needs of family, community, society, and nation with the aim to improve each individual learner's quality of life. Above all, educational institutions shall provide and develop learning processes. To do so, there is a need for instructors to carry out research for learning development (Chapter 4, Section 27-28). It can be seen from the National Education Act of 1999 that education in Thailand focuses on developing individual learners' potential so that they could be able to promote their self-development and

lifelong learning. Following is an overview of how the curriculum in Thailand is designed and delivered.

Thailand's National Curriculum has been designed and modified based on the changing of economic, society, and technology. According to National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and Amendments (Second National Education Act B.E. 2545 (2002)), the basic education curriculum is divided into two levels: national and institutional. According to the Ministry of Education, the curriculum framework at the national level has three components: (1) the curricular framework specifying its objectives, standards, as well as assessment and evaluation methods of teaching and learning; (2) the framework for the national core curriculum to be organized consistently through four three-year key stages; and (3) the framework for local curriculum providing schools with guidelines for adaptation of learning contents appropriate to their localities. According to the framework, there are eight subjects: Thai language; mathematics; science; social studies; religion and culture; health and physical education; art, work education and technology; and foreign languages. At the institutional level, each educational institution has an opportunity to plan, support, monitor, evaluate, and develop the local curriculum in order to meet their real needs. However, the local curriculum development causes problems of confusion and uncertainty of the curriculum developers about the learning contents, outcomes, and assessment which do not meet the standard criteria.

According to the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008), education aims to promote learners' capacity in all aspects: physical strength, knowledge, and morality. In particular, learners should be able to live desirable life and in harmony with Thai people and global citizens. Educational institutions are responsible to plan and implement their own curriculum, and the learner-

centered approach is of particular interest. That is, in the learner-centered approach, learners can apply a variety of learning processes to obtain their learning outcomes and curriculum goals. Those learning processes are integrated learning, knowledge-creating, thinking, social interaction, heuristic learning, learning from actual experience, actual practice, management, research, and self-learning. The Curriculum seems to provide many advantages for both learners and institutions. However, in order to implement such a curriculum, there is a need for significant reform education. According to the National Education Act of 1999, the reform of education in Thailand has its focus on: (1) learning reform; (2) reform of educational administrative structure; and (3) legal measure. That is, first, in order to implement a learner-centered approach, education should put its highest emphasis on learners. In other words, the learners should have an opportunity to develop their own learning and potential. Second, to reform educational administrative structures, there is a need to develop the teaching profession through reorganizing the training systems for teachers, faculty staff and education personnel, and also the utilization of resources and investment for education. Third, in order to provide a more systematic education, all legislations and regulations need to be immediately well-prepared.

### **The Impact of the National Education Reform Act on EFL Curriculum Practices and Methodologies**

According to the contents and standards for educational subjects provided in the National Curriculum, English is the subject which is in the category of foreign languages. In 1995, the Ministry of Education decided to start English in first grade instead of fifth. Moreover, there has been a change in how English is

taught and learned. According to the National Education Act, the traditional style of teaching has been shifted from the teacher-centered approach to communicative methods. The focus is put on learner-centered learning and critical thinking skills. However, there are three main important issues arising from the implementation of policy and the institutional framework.

### ***The Use of English as Medium of Instruction***

In responding to the global era, the Ministry of Education encourages all university classes to use English as a medium of instruction. In Thailand, many international programs both in undergraduate and graduate level use English to carry out teaching and learning. Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy, Commission on Higher Education (2008) reveals that there are 350 international master's degree programs, 296 bachelor's degree programs and 215 doctoral degree programs. However, in many universities, there is no clear policy of using English as a medium of instruction for each subject and each teacher. Therefore, there is no consistency in every class and subject. Some teachers use English along the course, some use it sometimes, and others never use it. The cause of this problem may be because there is a variety in English language abilities of individual teachers. While the National Curriculum aims to shift the teaching paradigm from the traditional grammar-translation method to communicative teaching methods, there is a need to reconsider whether teachers themselves still have difficulties in using English to convey their instruction.

### ***Teaching Methodologies and Skills***

In each English subject, each individual teacher may use different types of teaching methodologies and models different skills as well. Some teachers still use the traditional style of teaching, a teacher-centered approach, some use

more communicative methods, as stated in the National Curriculum. However, with a lack of training, many teachers might find that method difficult to apply in their contexts. Some may teach without knowing what types of methodologies or activities they use. The National Curriculum committee should take this issue serious. Research should be done in order to uncover perceptions and reflection of both teachers and learners towards the implementation of the new teaching method. Studying teacher and learner reflection will help revealing success and failure in implementing the curriculum policy as well as providing curriculum developers understandings about the real teaching and learning contexts.

### ***Learners' Readiness***

Thai EFL learners, before studying at a university level, have to study English for approximately eight years, generally started from Grade 5. However, the emphasis of those English courses provided for them is grammar and vocabulary. Undoubtedly, without enough practice using English to communicate inside and outside classroom, Thai learners have little exposure to authentic English usage. Even the focus of most English classes is vocabulary and grammar, Chanawong (2007) found that, when engaging in an oral communication, Thai EFL university learners themselves claimed that they have difficulties with insufficient knowledge of English vocabulary and structures. The National Institute for Educational Research (1994) also reveals that most high school teachers still control all classroom activities as in the traditional grammar-translation methods while teacher-students interaction is rarely found. Learning in this type of classroom, learners may find it difficult to find an opportunity to practice and use English. As a result, as Sakda (2000) confirms, Thai EFL university learners still have difficulties in oral English communication. Those

difficulties may cause debilitating anxiety which could make learners have negative attitudes and tend to avoid participating in the learning task.

To prepare the country for ASEAN integration in 2015, Thailand's Ministry of Education has announced 2012 as English Speaking Year. To do so, students in all schools are required to speak English one day a week. Without discovering teachers and learners' readiness and providing effective training for them, schools implementing this campaign may find difficulties. Sanyal (2012) reported in Asia Pacific News that cultural problems may lead to the difficulties in implementing the campaign. That is, according to Anupan Weerawong, Srinakharinwirot University Vice-President for International Relation, some Thai learners are passive learners who tend to be familiar with lecture-based learning. Furthermore, in public schools, it is difficult to find a class in which English is used in all types of activities. Importantly, there is always a claim that Thai learners are afraid to speak English. The constraints in implementing the policy and framework yield a real need to discover what teachers and learners would actually reflect their experiences, feelings, thoughts, and other perspectives towards what they are expected to do according to the policy.

### **The Why and How of Using Reflective Writing as a Tool for Reshaping Thai EFL Curriculum**

Reflection is a tool to help both teachers and learners think about what they have done, or what they will be doing in the future. Reflective writing involves an examination of an event or practice, and it is evidence of reflective and critical thinking. Hanley (1995) points out that critical thinking is composed of both cognitive and metacognitive processes. Metacognitive skills involve the conscious, planned, informed, and deliberate control of how to think and what to

think. That is, as Mumford (1986) highlights, a person who has metacognitive skills is the one who knows his or her own stages of learning and understands his or her own approach to deal with it. Reflective practice, in particular, is an approach that should 'pervade the curriculum' (Fanghanel. 2004: 576) Rogers (1980) also suggests that if a teacher has an opportunity of understanding each student's reaction to the instruction 'from the inside' and can implement educational processes which are suitable for an individual student, the learning will be significant.

### ***The Characteristics of Reflective Writing in an Academic Context***

In brief, the characteristics of reflective writing are: (1) looking back at an event that has been done; (2) analyzing the event or ideas by thinking in-depth from different perspectives and explaining; (3) thinking carefully about the events or ideas and ongoing progress. In Thai EFL contexts, it is more than valuable if both teachers and learners have an opportunity to examine what they have done. The reflection from both of them can be a tool for reshaping the Thai EFL curriculum. This is because reflection can reveal what actually happens in the real context, what teachers and learners think about themselves, what they think about methodologies and materials used, or what their goals of teaching and learning are. In doing so, the constraints or successful aspects of the curriculum can be revealed, and those who have authority in policy and curriculum design would benefit from these perspectives.

Burton (2007) points out that reflective writing can lead to community. That is, reflective writing about teaching and learning is an alternative way to invite others into our context of teaching and learning to see 'what is going on there and to think about the ramifications of certain problems and success' (p.

2). Teaching and learning in each classroom context is unique. Reflection can help revealing and expanding our perspectives beyond the individual classroom. Interestingly, as Pelz (1982) suggests, writing can also lead to learning. This is because when writing persons seek a way to review and reflect their experience by discovering and developing their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and ideas about experience. Therefore, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and ideas about what teachers and learners obtain from teaching and learning by implementing the national policy, may shed some light into how the National Curriculum of Thailand can be reshaped. Spencer (2007) reveals her dual teacher and learner experiences in the following poem. Such a poem might help Thai EFL teachers and learners to look back through their own situation and to reflect what they have faced and done.

### **Language Teacher as Language Learner**

I, who am teacher, am master,  
 Aloof in my wisdom and years,  
 Solemnly posing and drawing,  
 Th o' hiding my lack in my fears.  
 I, who am student, am shadow,  
 In darkness, half-formed yet afl ame,  
 Peer out, reach out for the candle,  
 Th en cower and blush at my shame.  
 I, who am teacher and student,  
 Look down from both sides of the wall,  
 Speak of my view overwhelming,  
 Defending and judging them all.



I, who am teacher as student,  
 Look, question, demand and endure,  
 Fear not the thoughts of my fellows,  
 In knowing the truth am secure.  
 I, who am student as teacher,  
 Watch over my neighbours unsure,  
 Filling the gaps of omission,  
 And guiding them safely to shore.  
 I, who am teacher from student,  
 Search deep in each eye to the soul,  
 In knowing, nodding and sharing,  
 More human to nurture our goal  
 (pp. 47-48).

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