

Perspectives on English Language Policy and the Importance of English in a Government Workplace

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the English language policy of a Thai government organization and the problems concerning the policy and practice in government working contexts. The data were collected via semi-structured interviews with eight civil servants from the Ministry of Labour: four civil servants from senior level and four civil servants from operational level. It was found that the current problems related to English language policy in the government organization are a lack of English skill practices and language management. The Thai civil servants were well aware of the significant role of English in a government work context and their English skills should be strengthened. The study contributes to an understanding of Thai civil servants' views on the importance of English skill development. English training programs would bring all the civil servants to a higher level of English proficiency and bridge to their use of English for professional development and everyday life. Besides, encouraging the Thai civil servants to develop their English skills should be strongly supported and linked to the English language policy of the organization.

Keywords: English language policy, Thai civil servants, government organization, English for professional development

มุมมองต่อนโยบายด้านภาษาอังกฤษและความสำคัญ ของภาษาอังกฤษในหน่วยงานราชการ

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษามุมมองของข้าราชการไทยที่มีต่อนโยบายภาษาอังกฤษในหน่วยงานราชการของไทย รวมถึงปัญหาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับนโยบายและการปฏิบัติงานในบริบทการทำงานราชการ ผู้วิจัยศึกษาข้อมูลที่ได้จากการสัมภาษณ์ข้าราชการไทยจำนวน 8 คน ในกระทรวงแรงงาน ซึ่งแบ่งเป็นข้าราชการระดับชำนาญการพิเศษขึ้นไปจำนวน 4 คน และข้าราชการระดับชำนาญการจำนวน 4 คน ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ปัญหาของนโยบายภาษาอังกฤษในหน่วยงานราชการคือการใช้ภาษา และการจัดการภาษา ข้าราชการไทยมีความตระหนักรู้ถึงบทบาทความสำคัญของภาษาอังกฤษในบริบทการทำงานภาครัฐและเห็นว่าทักษะภาษาอังกฤษของข้าราชการควรได้รับการพัฒนา การศึกษานี้มีส่วนทำให้เกิดความเข้าใจมุมมองของข้าราชการไทยที่มีต่อความสำคัญของการพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษและการสนับสนุนให้มีหลักสูตรฝึกอบรมภาษาอังกฤษให้ข้าราชการจะส่งผลดีต่อการใช้ภาษาในระดับที่ดียิ่งขึ้นและนำไปสู่การพัฒนาอาชีพและการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในชีวิตประจำวัน นอกจากนี้ ควรส่งเสริมให้ข้าราชการไทยพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษและเชื่อมโยงกับนโยบายการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษขององค์กรได้อีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: นโยบายภาษาอังกฤษ, ข้าราชการไทย, องค์กรภาครัฐ, ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการพัฒนาอาชีพ

Introduction

Globalization has integrated the world, with countries coming together to form a single global economy, and people communicating and receiving news directly from different corners of the world via the Internet. These activities tend to use English as a lingua franca or a common language of communication. In the present day, English is widely used in various contexts such as business, society, culture, education, and international politics. English is the most taught foreign language in the world and has been used extensively (Yano, 2009). Moreover, English is progressively becoming the significant language of scientific research and academic papers worldwide (Farrell & Martin, 2009).

English has been the main foreign language taught for at least 50 years in Thailand (Darasawang & Todd, 2012). In 1999, the Ministry of Education reformed the National Education Act for improving education standards and aimed to complete internationally in English skills (Kaur, Young & Kirkpatrick, 2015). However, the Education First's 2017 report remarked that English proficiency of Thai people is in very low ranking, standing at the 53rd out of 80 countries around the world and the 15th out of 20 countries in Asia. Remarkably, Thailand's English proficiency remains low despite the country's large tourism industry. English is used by urban middle class not Thai society in general (Keyuravong, 2015).

Although Thailand puts an effort into education reformation, the poor result of Thai people's English proficiency remains an issue, and an education problem has been the primary issue. Most Thai media and news direct their attention towards an educational policy for taking responsibility for the education problem. Many studies have found that a lot of problems exist in the education system of Thailand. English teaching in Thailand is largely unsuccessful because of poorly-trained teachers, poorly-motivated students, and infrequent opportunities for exposure to English outside of class time (Num-ura, 2013).

Thailand has set national standards and curricula which include four broad goals for English: effective communication, understanding of cultures, linking foreign languages to the content of other subjects, and applications outside classrooms (Darasawang & Todd, 2012). It would seem that the English educational policy in Thailand is relatively appropriate and was established as it should be. However, the policy implementation remains problematic. Due to the decentralization of central power to regional areas, schools in remote rural areas are expected to design their own English learning materials based on the needs of local communities. In particular, many teachers do not have sufficient skills necessary for designing effective teaching materials (Darasawang & Todd, *ibid.*). As a result, the educational policy has been criticized broadly for resulting in low English proficiency.

Nevertheless, it seems to be a one-sided perspective to say that the cause of Thai people's low English proficiency is the result of the only English

education policy. Regarding the theory of Spolsky's tripartite language policy, a language policy features three interrelated components: language practices, language beliefs or ideology, and language management (Spolsky, 2009). The most important element is language practices which are observable behavior and choices – what people do in real life situations. Language beliefs or ideology is the values or positions assigned to name a language, varieties, and features. Language management is the operational attempt by the authorities to adjust beliefs and practices. Hence, education is only one element of a language policy and the most important aspect is language practices. Accordingly, without language choices there could be no language beliefs or language management (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). Therefore, it is an oversimplification to denounce only educational policy on this matter.

Low English proficiency of Thai people can be an issue relating to Thailand's education policy promoting English as a foreign language and a compulsory subject for all education levels. This is why education is the first factor to which is attributed overall low English proficiency. However, two important components of a language policy: language practices and language beliefs, are also significant as previously mentioned. Moreover, Ricento (2006) stated that a language policy is a field of research which considers and explores the interaction of theory with practice. Research in a language policy can explain the relationship between language practices in different contexts, or the effects of the policy implementations in various aspects, such as cultures, races, regions, and politics. To support this, Schiffman (1996) stated that a language policy is ultimately grounded in a linguistic culture which involves administrations, constitutions, belief systems, religions, attitudes, cultural systems, stereotypes, and ways of thinking about the language. Simply put, the study of a language policy necessarily involves the sociocultural background of the community (Schiffman, 1996). Furthermore, McCarty (2011) characterized a language policy as a complex sociocultural process which is a human interaction, negotiation, and production vis-à-vis the supremacy. The view of a language policy is not as simple as top-down or bottom-up, but it is multi-layered and people in a community need to be involved (McCarty, 2011). These two concepts show that a language policy is

not only an administrative tool, but also a social construct involving various levels of a society from an upper level such as a government, an organization, and a schools down to an individual family. Regarding this, a focus only on education does not cover the overall issue as shown in the study of an English language policy. Other factors should be concerned.

A government sector is regarded as the most significant mechanism of a country. A government policy sets the direction of the country, and government agencies are the core mechanisms to drive the government policy. Civil servants or government officers are those who work for public services and related jobs under the government agencies. Unavoidably, English plays an important role in the government affairs. Typically, a civil servant is regarded as a representative of the country to international meetings or conferences in which English is the main language for communication. Likewise, domestic public services in various areas such as tourism and travel-related services nowadays also use English for successful business interactions with foreigners. Moreover, adequate civil servants' English skills can be viewed as an essential professional aspect for those who wish to serve the public. However, there has been little research into English language policy in Thailand, particularly in the field of an English language policy in government organizations.

This study aims to explore the Thai civil servants' views on current problems concerning the English language policy under the framework of Spolsky's tripartite language policy theory. The objectives of this study are to explore views of the Thai civil servants on the current problems of the English language policy in a government organization and their use of English in workplace, as well as the development of their English language proficiency.

Methodology

This study concerned reflections of the Thai civil servants towards the English language policy more than the policy itself. Their beliefs, perspectives, or practices regarding the English language policy were investigated. The study relied on interpretive and critical perspectives. A qualitative research design

was employed and the Spolsky's tripartite model (2009) was adopted as the conceptual framework of the study.

Eight Thai civil servants of the Ministry of Labour were purposively selected. They were chosen according to their duties and responsibilities in the foreign relations division and other divisions which also need English for communicating with foreigners. All the participants could be divided into two groups: four from a senior level (policy makers) and another four from an operational level for cross-checking results.

The participants are anonymous and coded as follows:

- Participants from a senior level are SL1, SL2, SL3, and SL4
- Participants from an operational level are OL1, OL2, OL3, and OL4

The study is qualitative in nature. The sample size is small because the qualitative research is more concerned with meaning, not making generalized hypothesis statements, and following the concept of data saturation (Cresswell, 2013). Thus, semi-structured interviews were used as the source of data collection. Data collection was conducted at the Ministry of Labour via individual face to face semi-structured interviews. Audio was recorded throughout each interview. Moreover, respondents' reactions were observed and note-taken during the interview. The interview questions were developed based on Spolsky's tripartite model (2009) including the general situation of English. There are four parts to the interview questions.

The interview started with asking the respondents' views of the general situation of the English language in Thailand with two main questions: 1) What are the main causes of low English proficiency of the Thai civil servants?; and 2) What are the obstacles that give rise to the Thai civil servants' English inefficiency? The second part focused on their views about the language ideology. The third part emphasized the language practices. The respondents were asked to elaborate their routine work in relation to the use of English. The last part of the interview concerned the language management in relation to how the English language influenced members of the government organization. Moreover, before ending the interview, the respondents were asked to give suggestions and advices on how to develop

the English proficiency of the Thai civil servants. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The transcription of the recorded interviews was carried out immediately after each interview was completed. Then, it was supplemented with the researchers' reflections on the data obtained as well as the respondent's reactions which were also written down for the data analysis. The data were collected in Thai; thus, translation-related issues were of concern. The justification of ensured validity and reliability were also carried out by sending the interview transcriptions back to all the respondents for member checking. Moreover, the data categorization was discussed with an expert in TESOL. For ethical consideration, the notion of the informed consent was prepared, and all the respondents' names and their personal information were not revealed.

Findings

1. General Situation of the English language in Thailand

All eight respondents agreed that Thais are not proficient in English for many reasons. It was apparent that English learning was an investment requiring a high capital input from parents who wanted their children to be fluent in English. The education standard was very different, especially in English learning, when comparing public schools and private bilingual schools or schools in urban and suburban areas and those in the country. In public school, students started learning English at grade five while in private bilingual school they could learn English along with the Thai language from kindergarten. The tuition fees of private bilingual schools was significantly more than public schools. Consequently, this resulted in the rise of education inequality. As one respondent stated:

“Education inequality has always been existed in Thai society, particulrly in Bangkok. When I was a child, I wanted to study in a bilingual school which was closed to my house. Their English course books were very beautiful with four-color-printed. They looked fantastic to me at that time. Unfortunately, my parents could not

afford it, so I had to attend a public school where I started to learn English at grade five with plain black and white course books.” (SL1)

Moreover, all of them referred to education quality, mentioning that the English curriculum emphasized grammars more than conversations. Many Thai students lacked an opportunity to use English in their daily life and only studied English in the classroom with little skill practices. In addition, children had never been encouraged to be confident in using English in real-life situations; as a result, many of them were diffident and had less confidence when talking with foreigners. Additionally, some respondents pointed out that Thai behaviors, to some extent, may cause low English efficiency. For example, some who tried to speak English like native speakers were usually accused of being insincere and unnatural.

Many obstacles held back the civil servant respondents from developing their English skills – having Thai as a primary language choice, having less opportunities to use English in working situations, being disincentive to practise English, and feeling insecure and anxious of making mistakes when using English. On the other hand, when their jobs as civil servants did not relate to the English language and did not provide them more chances of communicating in English, they tend to lack English practices and be afraid of making mistakes when using English. As a result, they considered it easier to avoid using the language. Although many realized that it would be better if they could use English confidently, their motivation or ambition may not be strong enough to push them out of their comfort zone. For instance, a respondent from the operational group accepted that when she needed to read a report from international news, she usually selected a Thai-translated version. As she explained:

“I was studying English since kindergarten which is earlier if compared with other children. However, after I graduated, I have never used English at work or in my daily life. So it’s very difficult for me to communicate in English now. I strongly believe that language practices are a very important factor for supporting people to have better English language skills.” (OL2)

2. Language Beliefs or Language Ideology

When asked about the Thai language and their national identity, some of the respondents agreed with the statement: *“The Thai language represents a national identity, and Thailand has never been colonized by the western countries.”* This may be one of the causes resulting in the current problem that Thai people were not proficient in English. However, these Thai government officers did not perceive English as a language of a colonizer, but the language for business communication. Thus, the Thais’ perceptions towards English has changed significantly. Therefore, all eight respondents did not take this proposition seriously or did not consider the above statement as a typical excuse of those who lacked English skills in the present day. Besides, a national language was linked to a national identity which was the pride of the nation. Nevertheless, all of the respondents gave a view that only learning English as a foreign/second or even a third language did not affect to the perceptions towards the first language. In this regard, learning English did not have any effects to learners’ Thai national identity. As one of them elaborated:

“Thailand cannot stand alone in the world economic. We need to do business and interact with people from foreign countries and use English as a medium of communication. For a national identity, we can use English to present our Thainess to the world and I think it’s not bad in this way.” (OL3)

That is to say, the respondents strongly disagreed that colonization by Western countries was a major cause of English insufficiency among Thais. They viewed that learning English a second/foreign or third language was not related to a national identity. It was definitely not the cause of having low English efficiency among Thais. As one emphasized: *“Even though I speak English fluently, it doesn’t mean that my Thainess is less than others.”* (SL3)

3. Language Practices

All the respondents had different duties at work; some worked directly with international agencies or had more opportunities to interact with

foreigners in English than other respondents. Nevertheless, all of them accepted that their English skills were insufficient for the government work context. In addition, English had a lot of influences on every work position in the government organization, not only on those who worked in the foreign relations divisions. As one respondent explained:

“In my view, English has a big influence on our department. We need to interact with people inside and outside the organization. Now many organizations have many foreign workforces, so it is undeniable that English becomes important in workplaces. In the past, we could simply use an English-written brochure to give information to foreigners, but now it is not enough. Many of the foreign people need to know more in detail and communication in English is really necessary. Thus, English is very important as it can help us to work successfully.” (OL3)

All the eight respondents insisted that the English skills of Thai civil servants could be developed. However, only short training programs were insufficient to improve their English language skills. General English training programs did not meet the different language needs of each civil servant. As one described:

“We have different types of job, so I think the different skills should be developed. Moreover, it cannot be short-term courses which last only 2 or 3 days. It should be continuing courses which can be linked to the application to our jobs. For example, some people are working with documents and they rarely meet and talk to foreigners, so other English skills, like reading and writing, should be developed. However, most of the programs now are only about general conversation or basic conversation for beginners.” (OL2)

However, many respondents said that offering long-term English courses may be difficult to organize because of annual budget allocation which may create uncertainty.

4. Language Management

When the respondents were asked to give views on the English language policy of the organization, the word “unclear” was derived from all of them. The most important reason they referred to was the concern about the annual budget, which did not include the English language development for the government officers. Besides, most training courses needed to wait for the left over budget as it was not considered as the first priority of the organization’s annual plan. Some respondents revealed that actually it was not only because of the budget, but the high-level policies and the policy implementation. At present, the English skill practice of the government officers is a matter of individuals’ interests. The officers who wish to develop their English skills must try to achieve themselves. With the exception of learning via the education system and some training programs, there are no other supporting policies to inspire or motivate people for English skill development.

In response to the issue of implementing English as a second language in Thailand, all the respondents reacted that it would be beneficial if the English language were implemented as a second language. Nevertheless, they considered that it could not happen in the near future. Over time, English has played an increasingly important role in Thailand. The perception of Thais has changed from English being the language of a colonizing country to being the language of business, technology, education, or more recently even politics. As one of the respondents explained:

“Sometimes we do not realize that English has influenced on our lives more than we think. It is not just important to know English nowadays, but it is essential. Therefore, I believe that there are more advantages than disadvantages to set English as a second language in Thailand.” (OL2)

Although all the respondents agreed that implementing English as a second language in the Thai context was a good idea, they suggested that this issue should be a lot more considered before being implemented by the policy makers.

To improve the Thai civil servants' English skills, the government should have a clearer English language policy or should set the English language skills development as part of the national agenda which is related to other policies focusing on improving English language skills of Thai people. Thai people, including those in the government organizations, should be inspired and encouraged to continue developing their language skills by giving more wages, work incentives and/or promotions as one of the core competencies for their career paths. In addition, coaching systems and English language guidelines for each work position were recommended. Furthermore, some civil servants needed to change their mind set towards the English language. They should instead consider English not as a special feature, but as an essential tool for work and everyday use. Therefore, the awareness of English language development could be raised.

Discussion

According to Spolsky's tripartite model (2009), a language policy features three interrelated components: language practices, language beliefs or ideology, and language management. From the current study, it was found that there were some problems in each of the three components of the language policy, particularly the language practices and the language management, and few problems concerning the language beliefs.

For the language beliefs, Thais give a priority to the English language compared to other languages taught and used in the Thai context. During the interviews, all eight respondents reflected that English competency in an organization could benefit the organization's image. They considered English competency as a professional tool which they, as the Thai civil servants, should acquire. However, one respondent shared her experiences while studying in school, stating that many students were afraid of speaking English even in English class with the mindset that those who pronounced words like native speakers were overacting. Nevertheless, in a professional setting, Thais who are fluent in English are commonly perceived as well educated and professional people. This is also regarded as a positive image for their working life. Therefore, most Thais have positive views towards the English language.

Another important point of discussion is that language practices are language choices. Obviously, the Thai language has been used widely across the country. In contrast, the English language is only one subject taught in educational settings. English can be found in popular tourist areas such as Phuket, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, Silom and Khaosan roads. Therefore, those involved in the tourism industry or working with multinational companies use English in their working life. The issue of language practices has been a major problem of the English language policy in Thailand. It is comprehensible that when people have choices, they will typically choose an easier and more convenient way. Thus, Thais need to be motivated to change and this can be made possible through language management.

Language management is also a major problem of the English language policy. Regarding the written policy, teaching of English as a foreign language has been written into the education policy. There are national standards and curricula in which English, along with other languages, has been set into four broad goals: effective communication, understanding of culture, linking foreign languages to the content of other subjects, and application outside classrooms (Darasawang & Todd, 2012). It is assumed that the English education policy was appropriately established. However, the policy implementation remains a problem. Because of the decentralization of central power to regional areas, schools in remoted areas are expected to design their own English learning materials based on the needs of local communities. However, some teachers lack sufficient skills to design effective teaching materials (Darasawang & Todd, *ibid.*). Therefore, educational policy is a basic starting point for Thai students. The policy which has not been implemented properly may be the cause of education inequality.

Previous studies focusing on the English education policy revealed that the policy implementation was a major problem. This present study, despite having a focus on a government organization, also confirms the same results that the policy implementation is a critical issue. In addition, the English language policy of the Thai government organizations is uncertain and intermittent. Subsequently, this can be resulted in the Thai civil servants

working for the government organizations who could be inactive in the English skill development.

Moreover, the English language policy in the Thai government organizations was not well-defined. Although the English competency of the Thai civil servants was written into the job description of every work position in the organizations, it was apparent that the policy could not be implemented effectively in practice. This was similar to the policy to drive for annual training programs of English skill development. However, in practice, the training programs were often not arranged according to the plan because of inadequate budgets. That is why all eight respondents pointed out the same critical issue that the English language policy of the government organization was unclear.

Importantly, the English educational policy should be implemented relatively to other policies of the country in order to improve Thais' English proficiency. Paradoxically, the Thai government has realized the significance of English vis-à-vis globalization although they lack a notable policy. The development of English skills has not been mentioned in any national policies although the Article 34 of ASEAN Charter stipulates that "the working language of ASEAN shall be English". ASEAN launched ASEAN Community in 2015; however, nothing has changed in terms of English language policy in Thailand. However, in 2010 the Minister of Education suggested that English should be made as the second official language, but the proposal was withdrawn the next day on the grounds of national security and identity (Darasawang & Todd, 2012).

Currently, English skills practice of Thais has been considered an individual interest. English skills practice of the Thai civil servants is also a matter of individual interest. The government officers who wish to develop their English skills must try to achieve it on their own. With the exception of learning via the education system and some training programs, there are no other supporting policies to inspire or motivate Thais to pursue English skill development. In this sense, some Thais can effectively communicate in English, while most Thai people cannot communicate in English at all.

Because they chose Thai, they do not feel English is essential for their everyday life.

The results of the study show that the Thai civil servants were well aware of the importance of English in their government workplace. The English language has had an influence on the government work context over a long period of time; nevertheless, Thailand has not been colonized by any Western countries. Almost every ministry has some connection with international agencies and the system of Thai law is also based on international standards. Many Thai regulations were drawn from the law of developed countries such as the U.S.A., the U.K., and Australia. The first draft of Criminal, Civil and Commercial Codes were in English and translated into Thai by the Ministry of Justice, which was first established in 1892 (Powell, 2012). Moreover, Thailand is a member of many international agencies and has ratified many international conventions which have to follow international standards and submit a country report to the international agencies regularly. Therefore, English is not an option but a required tool for government work contexts. The Thai civil servants, in this regard, need to be effective in English language use for enhancing the government working standard.

From the study, it is apparent that the civil servants are conscious of the significance of the English language use and realized that their English skills should be improved. Consequently, the language management at the national level should be the focus because only the top policies, such as national policy, can be enforced at all levels in order that there is a change in language practices and beliefs (Spolsky, 2009). English language development should be mentioned in the national agenda to raise public awareness and connect with related policies across sectors. Language development is one part of human resource development which needs a long-term plan and may require a significant proportion of the budget. However, the sustainable development of the country starts with human development and language development is an investment that will return dividends over the long term.

Implications

The results of this study contribute to further development of English skills and proficiency of civil servants in government organizations. The English language skills of civil servant should be promoted and supported by providing continuing English training programs with monitoring and evaluation, providing guidelines for English language use for each position in organizations, and developing an English language coaching system. Moreover, this study also raises awareness of Thai civil servants and policy makers who are in charge of language skill development along with professional development of the civil servants. From the study, these civil servants may be better aware of the significance of having good skills of English at work.

Limitation of the Study

This study has been limited by time and that it was conducted only in the Ministry of Labour. Only data from the interviews were considered. In future studies, the full range of government plans and policies concerning human resource development should be considered and other government organizations should be investigated.

Conclusion

This study presents another aspect of English language policy, that is, the policy in a governmental work context through the lens of the Spolsky's tripartite language policy model (2004, 2009). The study aims to explore the current problems of English language policy in a Thai government organization, to study the views of civil servants on the English language use and English language policy in the government organization and to find suitable solutions to develop English language proficiency of civil servants. The data were collected by interviewing eight participants from the Ministry of Labour and the semi-structure interview was employed.

The results reveal that the respondents have very few different views on English. They agree that Thais have insufficient English and English is very important and plays a significant role in government contexts. The main problem is English practice in real life situations. Many Thais do not have

opportunities to use English outside the classroom or in workplaces. Moreover, language management is also unclear. Although English has been mentioned by the Prime Minister several times, stating that Thais should improve their English skills, and some mobile applications have been developed for self-learning, in this sense, it is considered an individual interest to practice English. The policy at national level should encourage English. Therefore, the Thai government should seriously give priority to English by specifying that each sector must use English along with the Thai language, making English more engaging with real-life contexts, creating systematic English training programs which can respond to different working requirements, and encourage Thais to develop their English skills by giving some incentives or special promotions. Moreover, English should be included as part of the national agenda to receive public attention and be connected to other policies.

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