

Impact of Learner-Centeredness on Primary School Teachers: A Case Study in Northeast Thailand

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Due to its dominant role in economic globalization, English has become a critical tool in today's intercultural and technological era. In order to increase children's English language proficiency, Thailand reformed its educational system in 1999 and adopted a new approach, learner-centeredness. This research study reports on the impact of this new policy on primary school teachers teaching English as a Foreign Language in Thailand. The results from the semi-structured interview with twenty-five teachers suggest that the educational reform has not yet been as constructive as was expected. Teachers have partial knowledge and some misconceptions about learner-centeredness, preventing the approach from achieving its potential. Most teachers have low self-reported language proficiency and have no prior training on the new approach. Classroom practices are quite different from the expected learner-centered and communicative classes. Factors impeding the success of the policy include teacher, learner, institutional, external, and adoption factors. The results of the study call for more rigorous and extended teacher training, changes in foreign language curricula, and further research studies to investigate teaching methods appropriate to the Thai context.

Key words: language policy, learner-centeredness, primary school teachers

Due to its dominant role in economic globalization, English has become a critical commodity in today's intercultural and technological era. People with high education and high proficiency in English have more access to key resources and better opportunities for socio-economic success and advancement. In addition, high English proficiency increases a country's ability to compete economically in the international arena. Economic and social changes in the globalization era have forced several Asian countries to reform their language policy to improve communicative abilities in the globalized world (see e.g., Butler & Ino, 2005; Kwon, 2000; Lam, 2002; Nunan, 2003; Su, 2006). English has become a mandatory subject and is introduced to children at a younger age. For example, Taiwan requires children to start learning English from Grade 1 (Butler, 2004; Su, 2006). Similarly, in Korea, English is a compulsory subject from Grade 3 (Butler, 2004; Li, 1998). In addition, students in those countries are given more English instructional hours (Nunan, 2003). A sound amount of research has been conducted to study the education reforms in those countries as well as the impact of the new language policies on teachers. Teachers have received considerable attention since they are the agents of policy implementation and are likely to be a main indicator of success and failure of the reform movement.

The findings from a number of research studies such as Gorsuch (2000), Li (1998), and Lo, Tasang, and Wong (2000) reveal that teachers failed to effectively implement the new policy in their classroom practices. Teachers' perception of and resistance to change are often seen as the main causes of failure (e.g., Carless, 1998). Although teachers' negative perception of and resistance to educational changes do play a role, it was found that teachers' failure to apply the newly prescribed teaching methods in the classroom was due to other factors. Li (1998) and Lo, Tasang, and Wong (2000) found in their studies that teachers perceived the change in language policy and expressed rather positive attitudes toward the new teaching method. The main cause of teachers' failure to reflect the innovation in class stemmed from their lack of sufficient language proficiency. In addition, Nunan (2003)

asserted that one reason for unsuccessful implementation was that teachers did not receive sufficient training in language teaching. As such, teachers lacked clear understanding of the new teaching approach and possessed insufficient knowledge of teaching techniques that allow them to instruct a communicative class. Misconceptions and/or partial understanding about the new policy can lead to unsuccessful implementation (Lo, Tasang, & Wong, 2000). In addition, there is a mismatch between curricular rhetoric and reality (Nunan, 2003). Learners need rich input and adequate exposure to the target language in order to be successful in second language learning. Considering teachers' current low language ability and language environments not conducive to maximum language attainment in an EFL context, positive learning conditions may not be successfully provided to students.

CURRENT LANGUAGE TEACHING SITUATION IN THAILAND

Thailand, like many countries influenced by current economic and political realities, has reformed its educational policy including its foreign language policies. The Thai government has passed two educational bills, the Education Reform Bill of 1999 and the Educational Act of 2001 for Basic Education. The main emphasis of the new educational laws is the adoption of learner-centeredness, which requires radical changes in instruction for the first time in Thai history. Due to the perceived failures in English education in Thailand, the new foreign language policy has been well received from the public. It is hoped that the new policy would be able to help increase Thai children's language proficiency, particularly communicative skills.

Rationale for Educational Reform and Foreign Language Reform

Thailand enacted two educational laws, the Education Reform Bill of 1999 and the Educational Act of 2001 for Basic Education, to reform its

educational system. These new educational policies aim to develop Thai students in a holistic manner focusing on physical and mental health, intellect, knowledge, morality, and integrity. They should know how to acquire information, how to deliberate, and how to solve problems. Moreover, they should be able to use foreign languages to communicate and develop relationships with foreigners. The former educational system was believed inadequate in preparing Thai children to cope with economic, social, cultural, and politic changes in this new era. This was due to its traditional teaching styles of “chalk and talk” pedagogy, rote learning, and the focus on teachers as the center of teaching-learning activities (Office of the National Education Commission, 2006). Another main reason for the reform is that the content of the former educational system did not reflect learner or community needs. The previous foreign language policy was flawed in that after learning English for many years, many children unable to communicate in English or to search for information effectively. Thais’ level of English proficiency is low in comparison with other Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore) (Wiriyachitra, 2006).

According to the two laws, the heart of the reform is now on learning. The main approach that must be adopted for learning is learner-centeredness. This approach is supported in the 1999 law Section 22 that “Education shall be based on the principle that all learners are capable of learning and self-development, and are regarded as being most important. The teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling learners to develop themselves at their own pace, and to the best of their potentiality” (Commission of National Education, 1999). As such, students must become the main focus of the educational process; teachers’ roles are expected to change from the provider of knowledge to facilitators who support children’s learning. In addition, teachers should encourage learners to search for knowledge from different sources and manage their own learning in order to promote lifelong learning. To reach these goals, in 2001, the Ministry of Education with the cooperation of university teachers, educators, school directors, and experts developed strands and standards for eight main subject areas including 1) Thai, 2)

mathematics, 3) science, 4) social, culture, and religion studies, 5) arts, 6) health education, 7) occupation and technology, and 8) foreign languages. The subject areas, including English, must follow the core curriculum, strands, and standards provided by the Ministry of Education.

New Foreign Language Policy

The primary goals of foreign language learning and teaching are to foster learners' positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language and to develop students' communicative skills under the learner-centeredness approach (Ministry of Education, 2005a). In the former educational system, English was an elective subject introduced in Grade 5. The new laws now make English a compulsory course from Grade 1 onwards. English is taught about two hours a week for Grades 1–3, and three hours per week for Grades 4–6. At the end of Grade 12, students are expected to be capable of using foreign languages to communicate in occupational and higher education settings, as well as with foreigners.

Based on school grades, students are divided into four different levels, including preparatory level (Grades 1–3), beginning level (Grade 4–6), developing level (Grade 7–9), and expanding level (Grade 10–12). Schools are encouraged to develop their own content, curriculum, and materials based on the prescribed core curriculum and benchmarks. The benchmarks are comprised of four strands: communication, culture, connection, and community. Encouraging schools to develop their own content under the set benchmarks is believed to provide teachers an opportunity to create flexible curricula that meet the needs of the community and students. Finally, it is required that teachers adopt different teaching approaches, particularly learner-centeredness (i.e., the teaching and learning that reflects each individual's actual needs in different situations, helps learners improve their language ability at their own potential, and encourages learners to research information from different sources and to use that information in their real lives). To support learner centeredness, teachers are encouraged to use

various teaching approaches (e.g., Communicative Language Teaching, Integrated-Learning, Cooperative Learning, Project-based Learning, Content-based instruction, and Task-based Learning). In addition, different types of assessments, particularly authentic assessment, are to be used to evaluate learners' learning (Ministry of Education, 2005b).

Only a few studies have been conducted to study current educational situations and problems in Thailand. A couple of these studies, Chiangkul (2006) and Wongwanit and Wiratchai (2005), found that the education reform in Thailand progressed considerably slowly; national education did not improve as expected. Moreover, students' average achievement scores in all subjects and across educational levels were low, under 50 percent. These two studies provide some insight to the current educational situations and problems in Thailand. Surprisingly, no studies have been conducted to specifically investigate the impact of the English language policy on teachers at a primary level. Not only are these teachers agents of policy who play a major role in molding the minds of children, they are believed to have been profoundly affected by the new policy due to their insufficient language ability and language learning knowledge. Such studies, if conducted, will be beneficial to English instruction in Thailand. To improve English education in Thailand, it is important to understand its current situations and problems in order to provide appropriate solutions to them. In this present study, therefore, the impact of the new educational policy (i.e., learner-centeredness) on primary school teachers and their perceptions and reactions toward this policy was investigated.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to seek answers to the following four research questions:

1. To what extent do teachers understand learner-centeredness?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of learner-centeredness?
3. To what extent do teachers' practices reflect learner-centeredness?

4. What problems and challenges do teachers encounter in implementing the new language policy?

METHOD

This section will describe the research instrument, the participants and data collection scheme, and the data analysis and coding system used in this study.

Research Instrument

A questionnaire was developed for a semi-structured interview with participants. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections: (1) demographic information and primary school teachers' understanding of learner-centeredness, (2) their perceptions of learner-centered learning, and (3) open-ended questions to elicit teachers' understanding about learner-centeredness and problems and difficulties in adopting this approach (see Appendix 1). The initial questionnaire was checked by experts, who are professors in Applied Linguistics. It was then improved and piloted with two English teachers who had experience teaching primary school students in Thailand. After that, the questionnaire was improved upon once more, and the final version was typed and deemed ready for use. Its reliability was high, indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of .89.

Participants

The participants were twenty-five primary school teachers who taught primary English in the northeastern region of Thailand. The participants ranged from 23 to 52 years old; three teachers were under 30, ten were between 30 and 40 years old, and twelve were older than 40 years old. Three teachers had a master's degree; twenty-two teachers had a bachelor degree. Only seven teachers (28%) majored in English or education, but seventeen teachers (68%) had a degree in other subjects (e.g., Biology and Social

Studies). Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 30 years. Only one teacher reported having traveled to another country (i.e., Malaysia). Only two teachers were affiliated with academic organizations (i.e., Thailand TESOL and English Resource and Instruction Centre (ERIC)).

Data Collection

The survey was administered via phone interview in the participants' first language, Thai, in order to allow for insightful thoughts and answers from the participants. Prior to the interview, the participants were contacted by phone, and the interview time and dates were set up for participation in the study. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

Data Analysis and Coding System

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS for mean and standard deviation. The qualitative data from the open-ended question were analyzed through two methods. The data concerning difficulties and challenges in implementing learner-centeredness were analyzed through 'open and axial coding' techniques to identify categories and subcategories with the information (Creswell, 1998). Frequency counts were also performed to order the level of difficulties experienced by the participants. The other qualitative data concerning teachers' understanding of learner-centeredness was assigned a score using the developed framework (see Appendix 2). The framework for the coding was derived from previous studies (i.e., Cotteall, 2000; Lo, Tasang, & Wong, 2000; Nunan, 1994). A score of one was given to an answer which reflected the definition of learner-centeredness presented in the framework. Zero was given when the answer was generic and based on teachers' common sense, or was not related to teaching English in a foreign context or at a primary school level. Finally, minus one was given when the answer showed misunderstanding or misconception.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into two parts. The first part reports on the participants' demographic information, the current English teaching situation, and teachers' perceived language proficiency levels. In the second part, the results are structured in order to answer the research questions posted.

Current English Education Situation

The teachers who participated in this study reported that their schools introduced English to students starting from Grade 1. There were between 12 and 40 students per class, and teachers taught about eight to thirty hours per week (this includes English as well as other subjects) depending on the size of the school. Concerning learning resources, 28% (7 teachers) reported that they had a self-access learning center as either a part of their school or in a library at their school; 24% (6 teachers) reported having both a language lab and an English TV program (provided by the Ministry of Education). Twenty percent (5 teachers) reported that there were no any learning resources at their schools. Almost half of the participants (11 teachers, 48%) reported receiving no teaching guidelines, and only fourteen teachers (56%) received pre-service or in-service trainings concerning how to teach English or how to teach English adopting a learner-centered approach.

Teachers' Perceived Language Abilities

Regarding teachers' language ability, the participants were asked to assess their own language abilities (Level 1 to Level 6) adapted from Butler (2004). Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage in six skill domains. Overall, teachers' perceived abilities mostly ranked at Level 3, except the speaking and pronunciation domains (Level 2) (see Table 1). This information suggests that teachers' self perceived language proficiency was relatively low, and the perceived weakest skills were speaking and pronunciation.

TABLE 1
Teachers' Perceived Language Abilities

Skill domains	Most-Reported Perceived Level	Frequency	Percentage
Reading ability	Level 3 A short article containing simple sentences using a dictionary.	11	44
Writing ability	Level 3 A short paragraph using simple structure, but consistently making errors	9	36
Listening ability	Level 3 At a multi-sentence level with some repetition and slow speech.	11	44
Speaking ability	Level 2 Participate in simple and familiar conversations but with frequent pauses.	11	44
Grammar knowledge	Level 3 Know intermediate grammar (e.g., relative clauses), but do not fully understand.	11	44
Pronunciation	Level 2 Pronounce words somewhat correctly but have problem with some sounds.	10	40

Research Question 1: *To what extent do teachers understand learner-centeredness?*

The analysis of teachers' understanding of learner-centeredness was based on the developed coding framework presented in the method section. The results show that most of the responses provided by teachers were generic answers, which were probably based on their common sense and knowledge of other subjects (64%, 16 teachers). Only twenty eight percent (7 teachers) had a good understanding of learner-centeredness. Eight percent of the participants (2 teachers) showed some misconceptions about learner-centeredness. Some of the teachers believed that learner-centered learning involved teachers preparing activities and students doing all the activities, either alone or in groups, with teachers as the controllers of the activity. The most startling result was that some teachers mentioned that learner-centeredness involved allowing students to do what they desire to do in class. The score of the understanding of learner-centeredness is 0.2 of 1 (or 5 out of

25): 7 (correct answers) minus 2 (misunderstanding and misconception) and out of the 25 responses. In regards to teachers' roles, most of the participants seemed to clearly perceive the change from being the sole source of knowledge to facilitators, advisors, and consultants.

The results show that the participants seemed not to have a clear understanding of learner-centeredness in relation to English language teaching. Most descriptions of learner-centeredness were given based on the teachers' common sense concerning the word learner-centeredness, which is literally translated into Thai as "learners as the center". Also, it might be possible that the teachers provided a description based on the concept of learner-centeredness they had learned from other subjects.

Overall, these results show a misunderstanding of learner-centeredness in English language teaching. This issue should be deliberated seriously since teachers' misconceptions and partial knowledge of the concept may lead to its unsuccessful implementation and an unhealthy classroom atmosphere (Carless, 1998; Lo, Tasang, & Wong, 2000). Promoting teachers' appropriate understanding of innovations is crucial for the implementation of a new language policy. This increases opportunity for greater success.

Finally, despite a relatively clear idea about teachers' roles, it seemed that the participants had some misconceptions about learners' roles in learner-centered learning. As the findings reveal, certain participants believed that learners were to decide and perform activities by themselves, and learner-centeredness meant allowing students to do what they wanted. According to Nunan (1993, 1994), learner-centeredness focuses on taking learners' needs as the main departure point in the curriculum, influencing what will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed. It is wrong to transfer all the responsibility of learning to the students without preparing them. The role of teachers in learner-centered learning is to help students gain the most out of their educational experience through initiative, innovation, and responsibility. Most importantly, learner-centeredness does not simply mean that children can do whatever they want in classroom (Lo, Tasang, & Wong, 2000).

Research Question 2: *What are teachers' perceptions about learner-centeredness?*

To assess teachers' perceptions about learner-centeredness, nine questions from Part III in the questionnaire were used. In this section, the participants were asked to rate the level of their opinions on a Likert's scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree → strongly agree). The mean score derived from the scale of response was interpreted by the range suggested by Kaewpradit (1994). The results are reported in Table 2 together with their mean values and standard deviations.

Very high/Strongly agree	=	4.50 – 5.00
High/Agree	=	3.50 – 4.49
Moderate	=	2.50 – 3.49
Low/Disagree	=	1.50 – 2.49
Very low/Strongly disagree	=	1.00 -1.49

TABLE 2
Level of Teachers' Opinions (N = 25)

Statement	Level of Opinion		Level
	\bar{x}	S.D.	
1. Learner-centeredness is an effective approach.	4.12	0.78	High
2. Your students like this new teaching approach.	3.92	0.64	High
3. Teachers have to work harder.	3.52	1.19	High
4. You like this new teaching approach.	3.80	1.00	High
5. Your school supports the implementation of this new policy.	4.08	0.86	High
6. You agree with learner-centeredness policy.	3.76	1.09	High
7. You understand the strands, standards, and benchmarks provided by the Ministry of Education.	3.76	0.66	High
8. You use learner-centeredness in your classroom.	3.64	0.95	High
9. Your language ability is sufficient to teach English at primary school level.	3.64	0.76	High

Based on the high opinion levels illustrated in Table 2, teachers have positive reactions to learner-centeredness. The teachers thought that learner-

centeredness was an effective approach and they agreed with this new language policy ($x = 4.12$ and 3.76 , $S.D. = .78$ and 1.09 , respectively). However, the teachers also reported that in adopting this policy, they had to work harder at a high level of agreement ($x = 3.52$, $S.D. = 1.19$). Interestingly, teachers believed that their classrooms were learner-centered ($x = 3.64$, $S.D. = .95$) and that their English skills were proficient enough to teach English ($x = 3.64$, $S.D. = .76$). In sum, similar to the results from other studies, Thai primary school teachers showed positive reactions to the new language policy (Li, 1998; Lo, Tasang, & Wong, 2000). This may be due to their acknowledgement of the obvious need for a change in English teaching in Thailand; it is also possible that the teachers were hesitant to report negative reactions to the new policy. However, positive reaction may not always be an indicator of successful implementation. It is important to look at the teachers' actual practices in the classroom.

Research Question 3: *To what extent do teachers' practices reflect the policy of learner-centeredness?*

All teachers reported adopting the core curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education. The materials the teachers used, however, were commercial textbooks. Since they used commercial textbooks, teachers did not conduct a needs analysis, write a course description, or design lesson plans. Classroom activities and assessment were, therefore, very much dependent on activities and worksheets provided in textbooks. Two teachers reported using outdated textbooks and adopting the old core curriculum because "vocabulary and expressions in the new textbook were not familiar." They also mentioned that most of the content in modern textbooks focused on conversation, which as one teacher mentioned, "they (new textbooks) did not prepare students for the test."

In regards to classroom activities, "translating", "repeating after me" and "reading and writing" were the most common teaching techniques used (25 each) (see Table 3). The participants commented that these techniques were used due to students' low level of English ability. Only two teachers reported

using games, songs, and role plays in their classes. Interestingly, some teachers, when asked if they used games, songs, and role plays in class, mentioned that students did not learn when singing songs and playing games.

TABLE 3
Frequency of Activity Types Used by Teachers

Activity	Frequency
Translation	25
Repeat after me	25
Read and write answers	25
Group work	10
Dialogue pattern practice	7
Pair work	5
Telling a story	4
Sing a song	2
Games	2
Role play	2

In addition, most of the teachers (52%, 13 teachers) reported that they actually used very little English in class. About forty percent of teachers (10 teachers) used English during the activities, and only four percent (one teacher) reported using English all the time, which is quite questionable due to their self-reported language proficiency. Interestingly, all teachers reported using English in accordance with two different language varieties in class (i.e., Standard Thai and a local variety). The local variety, Esan, is widely spoken in Northeastern Thailand. Almost all children, particularly in rural areas, have a working knowledge of this variety. The two varieties, E-san and the standard Thai, differ in accent, intonation, and largely in vocabulary. It is common practice in all regions of Thailand that teachers, particularly in the rural area, use local varieties and the standard Thai interchangeably in the classroom. The role of code switching in the classroom and in (foreign language) learning is not clearly understood and needs further investigation.

Due to the participants' lack of clear understanding of learner-centeredness and their insufficient language ability, there is no doubt that their practices would deviate from the learner-centered approach. Based on the results of the

study, while teachers reported that they were implementing the learner-centered approach, their classroom activities reflected a contradictory picture in which traditional teaching styles were adopted (i.e., repeating after me, translation, reading and writing). This, however, should not be a surprise because not many of them received pre-service or in-service training. In addition, most of the English teachers were not experts in language or language teaching. These teachers relied on their backgrounds, their beliefs about how language should be taught, and the limited resources they had at hand.

Three textbooks used by the participants were reviewed. The topics of the textbooks reflect the core curriculum's suggested theme; all of them had integrated activities (e.g., listening-speaking, listening-writing, reading-writing), games, songs, worksheets, and tests. These integrated activities, however, seemed to be rarely used in class according to the results of the study. Surprisingly, almost no vocabulary development exercises were found in these textbooks, while it has been well documented that vocabulary knowledge is among the first things to be improved if second language learning is to occur (Alderson, 1984; Grabe, 2009; Nation, 2001).

To implement a new language policy, policy makers should take into consideration the curricular rhetoric and reality (Littlewood, 1999; Nunan, 2003). As mentioned previously, learners need rich input, adequate exposure to and practice of the target language, and sufficient vocabulary knowledge in order to be successful in second language learning. Considering Thai primary school teachers' current language ability and poor language environment, positive learning conditions may not be sufficiently provided to learners. Also, it is important to be aware of small culture as suggested by Aspinall (2006). Aspinall states that it is crucial to understand the learning and teaching culture in one's own context in order to understand why the implementation of the new language policy is not always successful. For example, understanding the concept of 'you-can-do-it-if-you-try' in a Japanese culture can help parents, teachers, students, and involved institutions better understand the reality in English teaching in Japan and why

communicative language teaching is not successful in Japan (see Aspinall, 2006 for detailed discussion). Similarly, it is important to understand that immediate classroom needs (e.g., learners' needs of explicit grammar explanation and a large number of useful words) are as important as communicative activities (Silver & Skuja-Steele, 2005). As such, teachers' failure to reflect the policy may not be considered as unsuccessful teaching. Their actual classroom practices may reflect classroom needs and 'small culture' of that particular context. Even though not focusing specifically on foreign language education, McGroarty's (2005) suggestions on combining many factors "to arrive at a more comprehensive explanation of current developments and derive guidelines for action" (p.10) should be well taken. Through careful examination of social and cultural norms and classroom activities, good research questions may be obtained, which could lead to better solutions that fit one's own teaching and learning culture (Li, 1998).

Appropriate understanding of what really occurs in classrooms as well as an awareness of social and cultural norms may lead to the development of more appropriate approaches to language teaching. It is crucial to understand how language is taught in Thailand. As the results revealed, teachers have insufficient language ability and language teaching techniques; they rely on commercial textbooks; and they use two dialect varieties to teach English. Opportunities for language production outside of the classroom are limited. There was no focus on vocabulary improvement, which is one, if not the most, crucial element in second/foreign language learning and teaching (Nation, 2001). Based on these findings, it is quite understandable why Thailand's foreign language teaching has not progressed as planned after more than ten years the reforms were first instituted. Success starts with having a clear understanding of the social and cultural situation in relation to foreign languages and developing and adopting teaching methods that fit the Thai context.

Research Question 4: *What problems and challenges do teachers encounter in implementing the new language policy?*

Based on the interviews from the open-ended question section, perceived challenges to the implementation of learner-centeredness include teacher factors, student factors, institutional factors, external factors, and adoption factors (see Appendix 3). The three frequently mentioned sources of difficulty are insufficient resources (e.g., books, media, language labs, computers), insufficient human resources (e.g., teachers with degrees in English, native speakers), and lack of training in learner-centeredness (frequency = 22, 12, and 11, respectively).

It seems the last two factors, particularly the latter, can be clearly seen as constraints on the implementation of learner-centeredness. With more extensive training, teachers can be more informed about the new approach and improve their language ability. In addition, increasing the number of native speakers and teachers with a degree in English will likely reduce the tension on teachers in teaching English in primary schools. However, the first factor (i.e., the insufficient resources) seems to show some misunderstanding about language teaching and learner-centeredness. It seems teachers closely connected learner-centeredness with the use of technology, particularly computers and multi-media computer programs. While instructional media are important and provide opportunities for learner autonomy, other factors may be more vital for learning and promoting a learner-centeredness approach in this context (e.g., government support, improved teaching techniques, and improved language ability).

CONCLUSION

The results of the study clearly show that the educational reform encouraging the approach of learner-centeredness has not been as constructive in improving the English language skills of Thai students as expected. Even though the Ministry of Education has invested great resources into the development of the new core curriculum and in teacher training, it seems that the education reform in Thailand has not been successful after

more than a decade of reform. There are several points the Ministry of Education needs to take into consideration. As the findings show, teachers have partial knowledge and misconceptions about learner-centeredness. Classroom practices are deviated from what is expected in a learner-centered and communicative class. Factors making it challenging to successfully implement the policy include five factors: teachers, learners, institutions, external factors, and adoption factors.

Implications for English Teaching in Thailand and Future Study

The main implication of this study concerns teacher training. It is vital that teachers be given more effective training aimed at improving their knowledge in three main areas: language proficiency, knowledge of learner-centeredness, and teaching techniques. The training should foster appropriate knowledge of learner-centeredness. The myth that learner-centeredness allows students to choose to study or not to study, and that it gives teachers more free time because students run all activities should be corrected. Also, the training should be specifically catered to teachers' needs. Currently, it is not critical that teachers are able to converse with native English speakers. While higher language abilities are the ultimate goal, it is more important to focus on teachers' immediate classroom needs, which are abilities to teach English at the level they are responsible for. This may help increase their confidence in their teaching. As such, the training should teach teachers to understand the material they are teaching and to provide the teaching techniques necessary to successfully teach foreign languages in primary schools. Finally, the training should be given on a regular basis over an extended period of time.

Another main point that needs to be considered is the lack of appropriate classroom materials. Teachers rely profoundly on commercial textbooks for classroom activities and assessments. But, commercial textbooks vary in terms of content and teaching styles. The Ministry of Education, therefore, should take part in book evaluation and selection. Textbooks should be accompanied by CDs and a teacher manual, which serves as both a self-study

material for teachers and a guideline suggesting how the book should be taught and what activities should be used. This suggestion may sound contradictory to Shohamy's (2005) suggestion on a democratic language policy and the new language policy aiming at encouraging a democratic language policy. However, given the current state of foreign language education in Thailand in which teachers are not yet able to create their own curriculum and materials due to their existing teaching schedule, extra workload, and deficient language ability, maximum textbook teaching resources are necessary. Despite my belief that a flexible curriculum may fit the needs of learners and their community, providing flexibility in curriculum writing and material development at this current time may not be feasible in Thailand. Flexible curricula and material development will be more appropriate in the future when teachers are more equipped with better language abilities, teaching techniques, assessment methods, and better knowledge of the policy. At this point in the future, they will be able to take charge.

Equally important to the aforementioned points, foreign language courses should specify the importance of vocabulary development as one of the first elements of the curriculum. Learners need sufficient vocabulary in order to be able to perform different language activities. In other words, when reading, writing, listening, or speaking, learners need to have enough vocabulary in order to understand and to be understood (Meara & Fitzpatrick, 2000; Read, 2000). Without sufficient vocabulary, it is hard for them to cope with second language tasks and improve their life-long learning skills, which are the ultimate goals of the new educational policy. This sufficiency in vocabulary learning may be one reason why after 12 years of compulsory English education (Grades 1 -12), students' average national test scores for English are still below 50 percent.

Finally, one interesting finding that emerged from this study is the heavy use of two language varieties in classroom. It seems that the role of code switching in English instruction in the Thai context is not clearly understood. Several studies have shown the advantages of including a local dialect in

formal education (e.g., Edwards, 1976; Malcolm 1992; Yiakoumetti, 2007). More research studies in this area should be conducted. In the same way, based on the concept of 'small culture' and 'context-specific rationale', future studies should be conducted to investigate, create, or adapt teaching methods that are most appropriate to the Thai context. Also, longitudinal empirical studies assessing the impact of the new language approach on students' actual language proficiency should be conducted. Such information will inform us more about the role of the new language policy, offer possible solutions to reduce the gap between reality and expectations, and most importantly, develop children's language ability. This cannot be achieved without the cooperation of all domains in society: the government, university teachers, grade school teachers, students, parents, and so on.

In sum, I hope that the findings from this present study on the impact of the learner-centeredness policy on primary school teachers may lead to more effective English instruction and serve as a starting point for future studies on the development and the implementation of curricular innovations. Also, the findings may shed light on the need to investigate effective ways to teach English in Thailand and other countries where English is taught as a foreign language.

Limitations

Generalization of results of the current study should be interpreted with caution. This study is a small-scale study, conducted in schools located in the Northeastern region, a remote area of Thailand. A study with more participants from different regions of Thailand and with different types of schools may provide a broader spectrum of the current situation. A larger scale study could help provide a better understanding of the impact of the learner-centeredness approach on primary school teachers. In addition, similar studies conducted in regions with different social and economic backgrounds could shed more light on the effectiveness of educational policy. Furthermore, since the data were based solely on teachers' perceptions, other

technical information (e.g., class observation, analysis of test types, and test characteristics) should be included in order to triangulate the findings. Such information would provide additional understanding of how policies are implemented at the operation level.

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APPENDIX A Questionnaire

Description: The main objective of this questionnaire is to study the implementation of the new language policy, learner-centeredness, in Thailand. No part of your name and school will be presented. Please provide as much information as you can.

I. Background information

1. Demographic information:

1.1 Age: _____ years old

1.2 Level of Education : BA MA PhD Other: _____

Major: English Other: _____

1.3 Years of teaching: _____

1.4 Any time abroad: _____

2. Current class:

2.1 Teaching load: _____ hours/week

2.2 Number of students: _____ per class

2.3 Materials: _____

2.4 English introduced as a compulsory Subject at Grade ____ Age ____
yrs

2.5 Use of English in classroom (choose one):

() All the time () During activities () When giving
instruction: () Very little () None

2.8 Are you a member of an academic organization? Yes No

If yes, what organization? _____

2.9 Do you have the following learning resources at your school?

Language lab Yes No

Self-Access Learning Center Yes No

TV program in English

2.10 Did you receive any training? Yes No

2.11 Did you receive any guideline on LC from the Ministry of

Education? Yes No

II. Understanding of Learner-centeredness

1. What is learner-centeredness?

2. Did you use the following activities in your classroom? (Make a tick (/))

Activity	Yes
Translation	
Repeat after me	
Reading and writing	
Group work	
Dialogue pattern practice	
Pair work	
Telling a story	
Sing a song	
Games	
Role play	
Project-based learning	

III. Teachers' Perception on Learner-centeredness

5=Strongly agree, 4=Agree, 3=Moderate, 2=Disagree, 1= Strongly disagree

Statement	5	4	3	2	1
1. English is important for your students.					
2. Teachers have to work harder.					
3. Your students like this new teaching approach.					
4. You like this new teaching approach.					
5. Learner-centeredness is an effective approach.					
6. Your school supports the implementation of this new policy.					

- 7. You are not worried about national tests (Levels 1 and 3).
- 8. You agree with learner-centeredness policy.
- 9. You understand the strands, standards, and benchmarks provided by the Ministry of Education.
- 10. You use learner-centeredness in your classroom.
- 11. Your language ability is good enough to teach English.

12. Problems & Challenges in implementing learner-centeredness

13. Other supports you need in order to successfully implement learner-centeredness

14. Do you see any positive effects of the policy on children's English language learning?

15. Comments and suggestions to improve English instruction in Thailand.

Thank you.

APPENDIX B
Coding for Teachers' Understanding of Learner-centeredness

No.	Coding	Score
1.	Decisions concerning what will be taught made with reference to learners.	1
2.	Decisions concerning when it will be taught made with reference to learners.	1
3.	Decisions concerning how it will be assessed made with reference to learners.	1
4.	Active involvement of learners in communicating in the classroom	1
5.	A focus on a use of authentic materials	1
6.	Learner autonomy	1
7.	Teachers are facilitators.	1
8.	Generic answer (i.e., based on common sense)	0
9.	Misconception (e.g., students doing all the talk and all the work in classroom)	-1

APPENDIX C
Sources and Difficulty in the implementation of Learner-Centeredness (LC)

Sources and difficulty	No. of mentions
Teacher factors	
Lack of training in LC	11
Deficiency in English	5
Lack of teaching techniques	5
Few opportunities for retraining in LC	3
Little time for developing materials for LC class	3
Higher workload	3
Lack confidence in teaching English	1
Deficiency in preparing lessons promoting LC	1
Misconceptions about LC	1
Student factors	
Low English proficiency	7
Lack of motivation for developing English ability	3

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Shyness	3
Lack of disciplines	2
Deficiency to perform activities by themselves or work in group	2
Deficiency to initiate learning and to take responsibility in learning	1
Resistance to class participation	1
<hr/>	
Institutional system	
<hr/>	
Insufficient resources (e.g., books, media, language lab, computer, English program)	22
Insufficient human resources (e.g., teachers with degree in English, native speakers)	12
Insufficient funding	6
Lack of support	6
Short instructional time to cover the whole content	2
Lack of teaching guidelines	1
Large classes	1
Great amounts of content to cover	1
<hr/>	
Adoption factors	
<hr/>	
Resistance to change	1
<hr/>	
External factors	
<hr/>	
Parents' inability to support children's learning	1
<hr/>	