

IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS ON TEACHING ENGLISH TO THAI STUDENTS

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As a result of my past experience in teaching English to Thai students and in studying and using foreign languages myself, I have some ideas about what I think should be taught, on the advanced level, either in regular day schools or in special night schools. Therefore, I am taking this opportunity to pass along these ideas to anyone who might be interested, and I venture to hope that someone may agree with me on the need for the teaching of certain things I suggest.

On the other hand, I am fairly certain that many people will not agree with some of the things I say, but I hope you will not think badly of me for saying them. In all sincerity, I simply would like to see Thai students become more proficient in using the English language. It is a shame that so many of them study English for so many years but are still unable to use it effectively.

Some of my suggestions for new courses or new ideas in teaching may not be new at all. It is quite possible that others had these ideas before I did and that they have already put some of them into practice. If so, then I must plead guilty of ignorance of current English-teaching techniques in Thailand and beg you to forgive me on that score.

I have organized my ideas to provide for a three-year course or curriculum in English, as follows:—

I. GENERAL SUBJECTS FOR EACH YEAR

A) First Year. Grammar, Reading, Composition, Translation, Dictation, Dictionary Usage, Current Events, Conversation.

B) Second Year. Grammar, Reading, Composition, Translation, Dictation, Conversation, Dictionary Usage, Current Events, English or British History.

C) Third Year. Grammar, Literature, Composition, Translation, Dictionary Usage, Conversation, American History, Thai History and Culture, Interpreting, Correspondence.

II. NOTES ON THE AFOREMENTIONED GENERAL SUBJECTS.

The basic objective in all the above-listed courses is to use material in English as much as possible. This means that simpler books or material would have to be used, of course, in the first year. The over-all goal of such a three-year course should be to make the student really qualified in the English language, so that he can speak, read, write, and understand it with considerable facility and correctness. (Please see specific remarks on various subjects, under section "IV", for subjects not normally taught in Thai schools.)

III. COMMENTS ON CURRENT ENGLISH - LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THAILAND

A) The teaching of précis-writing as a separate subject is not considered very useful. It is felt that linguists rarely have to make a précis in a foreign language. Linguists usually work primarily in the translating and interpreting fields. Nevertheless, linguists sometimes do have to make summarized translations, in order to do a job quickly, so they should have some experience in being able to condense material, while retaining important details but eliminating less-important details. Therefore, a small amount of time might be devoted to précis-writing, as a part of the classes in English composition; and some time might be devoted to making summarized translations, as a part of the classes in translation.

B) The teaching of letter-writing should not be attempted until the third year of the curriculum, after the students have enough

basic knowledge in composition. Letter-writing should then be completely covered in the third year, under the title of "Correspondence". Above all, students should be taught that there are many kinds of letters and many styles for writing them, and they should learn about real-life English-language letters such as the kinds they will one day see and write themselves. Too often, we fear, Thai students are taught to write letters that have little practical value in this modern and fast-moving world. They should be made to realize from the beginning that they will be using English in letters for the purpose of communicating with foreigners—not for communicating with other Thai people. (The Thai language is certainly adequate for the latter purpose!) Therefore, teaching such letters as those to one's headmaster, to one's parents, to one's friends, etc. is not felt to be very practical, simply because the addressees in such cases are almost always people whose native language is Thai (the same as for the students who write the letters).

C) It is felt to be impractical to divide each year's work into a definite amount to be covered each term, or each semester. Planning should be made on a yearly basis instead of on a term or semester basis. Languages must of course be taught progressively; however, they are not easily broken down into component parts in the same way that certain other subjects are (such as the natural sciences, including mathematics).

D) There is still too much emphasis on memorizing grammar rules but then not putting the rules into practice. It does little good to know grammar rules by heart if one cannot put them to practical use in writing or speaking English. There is also still too much "old-fashioned" grammar taught (such as the differences between "shall" and "will", the plurals of very rare English words, the subjunctive mood, etc.). In our view, students should concentrate on the basic and really important grammatical rules and spend a great deal of time in putting these rules into practice. It does very little good indeed to learn grammar

rules if they are not put into practice or if such rules have lost the importance they might have had fifty years ago.

E) In conversational English, students should not be unnecessarily burdened with rules regarding intonation and stress in speaking. Intonation and stress, in our view, are better learned by imitation of native speakers or imitation of others who can speak as native speakers do. It is hard enough for a foreign speaker of a language to remember the words he wants to use and to put them in reasonably good grammatical order; if he also has to worry about intonation and stress at the same time, the result is too often a poor, worried, and hesitant speaker. The study of intonation and stress rules in English should be left to students who have already mastered the more basic aspects of the language. After all, it makes little difference in real life whether someone uses an un-native stress or intonation in an English sentence; the meaning is usually still clear. Foreign speakers of English should not be expected to be able to speak English with exactly the same accent that native speakers have. Of course, they may one day be able to do so, but who can deny that this takes years of practice and experience? And is it really necessary to speak English with exactly the same accent that native speakers of English have? I don't think so. (However, students should know of course on which syllable a word is accented.)

IV. SPECIFIC REMARKS ON CERTAIN SUBJECTS LISTED IN SECTION "I". (Some of these subjects are not presently taught in Thai schools, so far as I know.)

A) First Year

1) Subject: TRANSLATION

a) *Objective.* To prepare the students to be able to make translations of *simple sentences* from Thai to English and from English to Thai.

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b) *Practical work.* Dictation and assignment of progressively-difficult sentences for translation.

2) Subject: DICTIONARY USAGE

a) *Objective.* To familiarize the students thoroughly with bilingual dictionaries.

b) *Practical work.* Extensive exercises and assignments requiring the usage of bilingual dictionaries.

c) *Texts.* Thai-English and English-Thai dictionaries

3) Subject: CURRENT EVENTS

a) *Objective.* To familiarize the students, in simple English, with current events and important people in Asia (especially Thailand).

b) *Practical work.* Reading, explaining, translating, and discussing current news items about Thailand and Asia (such discussions may of course have to be in Thai during this first year; however, the material under discussion should be in English).

c) *Material.* Current newspapers and magazines (in English).

4) Subject: CONVERSATION

a) *Objective.* To teach students how to ask and answer simple questions and to make simple explanations.

b) *Practical work.* Reading and discussing simple conversational material in English; asking and answering simple questions in English.

B) Second Year

1) Subject: TRANSLATION

a) *Objective.* To prepare the students to be able to make translations of more difficult sentences from Thai to English and from English to Thai.

b) *Practical work.* Dictation and assignment of progressively more-difficult material.

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2) Subject: DICTIONARY USAGE

a) Objective. To teach students how to understand and use *simple all-English* dictionaries.

b) Practical work. Extensive exercises and assignments requiring the usage of *all-English* dictionaries.

c) Texts. Any good *all-English* dictionaries especially prepared for young *English-speaking* students or for foreign students (such as *Webster's*).

3) Subject: CURRENT EVENTS

a) Objective. To familiarize the students, *in English*, with current events and important people in *English-speaking* world (particularly the *British Commonwealth* and the *United States*).

b) Practical work. Reading, explaining, translating, and discussing current news items about the *British Commonwealth* (the *British Isles*, *Canada*, *Australia*, *India*, *Pakistan*, etc.) and the *United States*.

c) Material. Current newspapers and magazines in *English*.

4) Subject: CONVERSATION

a) Objective. To teach students how to converse beyond the point of simply asking and answering simple questions.

b) Practical work. Reading and discussing conversational material in *English*; short talks by students, *in English*, in front of the class.

5) Subject: HISTORY OF THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS.

a) Objective. To familiarize students with the main historical facts about the countries of the *British Commonwealth*, *by using English to do so*. (This should not be too difficult for students since they will probably already have learned the same things in the *Thai language*.)

Work

b) *Practical work.* Reading, explaining, translating, and discussing selected material from history books written in English.

c) *Texts.* Selections from books available in the school or public libraries.

C) Third Year

1) Subject: TRANSLATION

a) *Objective.* To prepare the students to be able to make more-difficult translations from Thai to English and from English to Thai.

b) *Practical work.* Translating selected material.

c) *Texts.* Selections from books available in libraries from current magazines and newspapers.

2) Subject: DICTIONARY USAGE

a) *Objective.* To familiarize students with standard all-English dictionaries, such as *Webster's* and *Oxford*.

b) *Practical work.* Extensive exercises and assignments requiring the usage of standard all-English dictionaries.

c) *Texts.* Dictionaries in the school or other libraries (students will probably have to do such work in the library since such dictionaries usually cannot be taken out of the library, and they are too expensive for most students to buy).

3) Subject: CURRENT EVENTS

a) *Objective.* To familiarize students with current events and important people in the world as a whole, *in English*.

b) *Practical work.* Reading, discussing, translating, and explaining current news items.

c) *Material.* Current newspapers and magazines in English.

4) Subject: CONVERSATION

a) *Objective.* To prepare students to be able to make all sorts of explanations in English about things which they, as Thai citizens, should know about.

Work

b) Practical work. Reading and discussing advanced conversational material; speeches and debates in English; explaining things in English as if one were a guide to a foreigner.

5) Subject: HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

a) Objective. To familiarize students with the main points of American history, by using English to do so.

b) Practical work. Reading, explaining, translating, and discussing selected material from history books.

c) Texts. Selections from books available in school or other libraries.

6) Subject: THAI HISTORY AND CULTURE

a) Objective. To familiarize students with the main points of Thai History and Culture (in English) so that they will be able to explain and talk about such things to foreigners.

b) Practical work. Reading, explaining, translating, and discussing selected material from books about Thailand, written in English.

7) Subject: INTERPRETING

a) Objective. To prepare students to be able to make rapid and accurate spoken translations from English to Thai and from Thai to English.

b) Practical work. Making simultaneous translations of what fellow-students say, of what the teacher says, of motion-picture films (if possible), or of tape-recorded material.

8) Subject: CORRESPONDENCE

a) Objective. To familiarize students with modern British and American correspondence and to prepare them to be able to write such material themselves.

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b) *Practical work.* Studying, discussing, dictating, and preparing correspondence work.

c) *Texts and materials.* Books that contain examples, of modern, real-life letters; examples of letters actually used by commercial, government, and private parties in Thailand.

V. CONCLUSION.

Although I do not claim to be an expert in educational methods and techniques for teaching the English language to foreigners, I feel that my experiences and observations have given me the right to present my views, at least. I readily confess that, while studying in the university, I never had the intention of becoming an English teacher in a foreign country, and had no idea that I would ever be coming to Thailand. However, now that I have ended up in Thailand—so to speak—I find myself more and more interested in how best to teach Thai students the English language. And because of the fact that I myself have been an interested student of foreign languages for many years and have seen how languages are put to use in various ways, I feel that I can well understand and sympathize with the problems that Thai students have in learning English. In short, my desire is to help Thai students of English get more and better results out of the long years they spend in studying English. If, however, my ideas are not correct, not logical, not practical, etc., then I would be pleased to hear or read anyone else's ideas on this subject.