

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Interest in the Subject, the Objectives, and the Main Hypothesis of the Thesis

My interest in the subject of English conversation schools in Thailand originates in my family background. My late father has been the founder of an English conversation school "Wannavichit Passa lae Turakit", which he established in 1957. I have watched the school operate ever since I was a child. The school was closed after my late father's passing away in 1990. At that time I was studying in the USA, where I spent 8 years of high school and university.

in the then booming finance industry. Later, I moved back closer to my "roots", becoming the manager of a tutorial (foreign university entrance exams) school franchised of a major USA chain of schools. The school, which is tutorial, is not covered in this thesis.

Even though the school I helped to found was not directly a conversation school, it was still in a related industry, and it afforded me the opportunity to watch the far-reaching changes, which this industry went through since my late father operated his pioneering school in Siam Square.

More and more, I became interested in studying these differences in the perspective of the wider changes, which I felt Thailand went through in the years of my absence. The industry of English conversation schools became, in my view, a small microcosm, through which I could learn more about the internationalization of Thailand in the 1980s

and 1990s. Also, the boom, which this industry went through, was, in my eyes, a symptom of the shortcoming of the formal educational system in coping with these changes, serving, as it is, as both a safety lid and a warning sign.

In organizing my ideas for this thesis, I formulated the following research objectives:

- 1) To analyze the structure and development of private sector English conversation schools in Thailand.
- 2) To explore the nature of demand for English proficiency of the Thai workforce by examining the curriculum of English conversation schools.
- 3) To evaluate the supply of English teaching in the formal education system from the 1960s onwards.
- 4) To examine, in brief, the socio-political and economic factors that have had an impact on the demand for English proficiency in Thailand from the 1960s onwards.

These objectives served as the road signs for organizing the data and drawing conclusions. The first objective is approached in the 6th chapter that addresses the issue of the structure of the industry and the 7th chapter that addresses the issue of the development of the industry. The 3rd objective is discussed in chapters 4 and 5 that deal with the issue of the supply offered by the formal educational sector. The 4th objective is discussed in the 8th chapter which analyzes the development of the industry of English conversation schools in view of the demand for English proficiency.

While the objectives were instrumental in organizing the data, they were, in their turn, also affected by the findings. This was particularly true as regards the second objective. Examining the operations of a wide variety of English conversation schools I more and more reached the conclusion that what attracted people to them was not a new and innovative curriculum, which very few of them in fact had, but the access they offered to teachers who were native speakers. The material presented by these teachers

was in most cases based on textbooks available to the general public in all major bookstores. Interestingly, there was no special curriculums tailor made to the Thai cultural milieu, or designed so as to confront problems and difficulties that are peculiar to Thai students. Curriculum was, in fact, hardly an issue at all.

The contrast between the formal educational system and the non-formal English conversation schools could not be bigger. In the first, "revolutionary" curriculums were introduced time and again, but the building of teachers was somehow forgotten. In the second curriculums attracted hardly any attention, with the focus being on the management of foreign teachers.

This focus of the industry of English conversation schools on foreign teachers who are native speakers is, in my opinion, an important indicator of the nature of the demand for English proficiency which has been building up in Thailand in the past few decades, and will be examined in detail in the body of the thesis.

My claim will be that the industry of English conversation schools has been quick to identify the nature of the demand for English proficiency and to restructure itself in a way that enabled it to meet it head on. The formal educational sector, on the other hand, has also identified the nature of the demand correctly. but in organizing itself to meet it, has put the emphasis on the wrong elements of the supply equation, and has therefore consistently failed to "deliver the goods".

1.2 The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is composed of 9 chapters organized as follows:

- 1) Introduction

- 2) Methodologies in English teaching: This is a general chapter which clarifies some of the concepts which are used throughout the thesis. In the chapter I outline the different approaches that exist in pedagogical circles as regards to how one should teach a language.
- 3) History of English teaching in Thailand: This chapter offers a broad picture of how English teaching started in Thailand during the reign of King Mongkut, Rama the 4th, and how it has developed since that time. My focus is on trying to link the development of English teaching to the country's economic and trade policies and its orientation towards the west.
- 4) Development of the supply of English teaching in the formal sector from the 1960s to the present: This chapter surveys the development of English teaching starting from the major curriculum revision of 1960 until the present. The focus is on major policy changes and attempts to modify the way English is taught in schools to better fit updated educational approaches, the needs of the country and the demand of the public. As we will see, while many of the policy changes were adequate in themselves, they failed on the implementation stage. New policies that try to improve fail again and again to focus on the major weakness of the system as a whole, that of adequate manpower.
- 5) The problem of teachers: This chapter focuses specifically on the major problem of the formal sector identified in the previous chapter, that of the shortage of well trained teachers.
- 6) The structure of the industry of English conversation schools: In this chapter I turn from the formal educational sector to the private industry of English conversation schools. I examine the different types of schools categorized by ownership structure, management, marketing and recruitment policies, curriculum and other attributes. The aim is to draw a picture of the industry as a whole and its constituent parts.
- 7) The development of the industry of English conversation schools: In this chapter I examine the development of the industry of English conversation schools from the

1960s to the present time. Particular emphasis is laid on an analysis of which characteristics of the industry have changed and how they are linked together. I also distinguish between a period of slow growth and a period that is characterized by both high growth as well as sweeping changes in the way the industry operates.

8) An analysis of the development of the industry of English conversation schools in light of the changing demand for English proficiency from the 1960s to the present. The first part of the sector looks at the demand side and how it is related to socio-political and economic factors. The second part is the analysis of the findings and it is here that I bring together the various conclusions reached at different parts of the thesis

9) Conclusions.

1.3 The Empirical Data Used in the Research

The data collected for this thesis came from a wide variety of sources. These include:

- 1) General statistics about the economy and trade of Thailand.
- 2) Specific (and very fragmented, one should say) statistics and lists available with the Ministry of Education about the industry of English conversation schools. The data obtained from the Ministry was crucial in offering a complete "map" of the industry and giving details of each operator.
- 3) Papers and books written about the development of education in Thailand and particularly the English teaching sector. These include both books written by Wyatt about the early days of education in Thailand during the reign of King Rama the 5th, as well as papers that describe the revisions of curriculum of English teaching used in the Ministry of Education and other related topics.
- 4) Interviews conducted with school owners, school managers, teachers and students. This is perhaps the most important source of primary data used in this thesis. The bulk of the information was obtained from interviews with the managers or owners of

15, which represent a cross section of schools of various types. Other interviews were used as supplementary data and were conducted over a long period of time.

5) Brochures, selling materials of schools. I collected brochures, flyers. Advertisements, course-listings and other data available from a large part of the 57 schools that I covered in the thesis. These materials were used together with the interviews to compose a complete picture of the industry.

6) Observation: In order to get a complete feel of the locations, the atmosphere and the outlook of the schools, I visited the majority of schools on the list, mostly presenting myself as a prospective student. Visiting the locations made the picture of the industry more vivid and tangible.

I listed the sources of data used. It is important to note that there were no secondary sources of information available about the industry of English conversation schools at all. No books, research papers or industry publications. In that sense, I was left to depend completely on primary data about the industry.

Also, it is important to note that there was no clear-cut objective criterion in selecting the 15 schools where I conducted in depth interviews, and the 57 schools, which I selected to survey and collect data about. In my selection I attempted to offer as wide a selection of modes of operation as possible. I presume that there might have been a certain bias against small owner-teacher schools and in favor of international brands and nation-wide chains. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that it was in the area of international names and corporate-like chains that most of the "action" took place in the past two decades. The lists of schools at the Ministry of Education would corroborate this observation. Since our interest was in the developments that took place, this bias is not too detrimental to portraying a realistic picture of this very active and interesting industry.

1.4 Research Methodology

The research methodology used for the collection of the majority of the primary data in this thesis falls under the heading of "oral history."

Oral history would be best described as follows:

1) "Oral history is a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life. It is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s" (cited from <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/> the website of the "oral history association of Dickinson College)

2) "The term oral history refers to (1) a qualitative research process based on personal interviewing, suited to understanding meanings, interpretations, relationships, and subjective experience; and (1) a product—an audio or video tape recording—that is an original historical document, a new primary source for further research. Oral history interviews investigate interactions, relationships, dynamics, and contexts. Among the challenges inherent in gathering oral histories and interpreting them are building trust and rapport, balancing multiple perspectives, negotiating interview-interviewee roles, managing personal bias, and maintaining the ethics of the research partnership. Oral historians seek broad-based information beyond their immediate research needs and arrange ways of sharing that information with the larger community by depositing the tapes or transcripts and related materials in archives, libraries, and other special collections and by producing publications and programs aimed toward disseminating the information gained in the oral history partnership.

Oral historians are found in academic settings, government offices, libraries and museums, medical and military settings, community centers, and anywhere people are studying people and the past. Through local, state, regional, national and international organizations, oral historians promote professional standards for research" (cited from http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Definition.html the website of Baylor university's association of oral history)

As noted in the above citations, oral history is at once the oldest and the "newest" in historical information gathering. It constitutes a "going back to the root" and an attempt to escape the limitations which confront historical research which relies exclusively on written documents.

This thesis is not a purely historical document but it relies on historical perspectives of the development in time of a certain socio-economic phenomenon. As the development in time of this socio-economic phenomenon is not recorded in written documents, we are left with no choice but to construct such documentation ourselves by going directly to the players themselves and asking them to report to us about what took place. These interviews are "oral history", and in that sense oral history" is the methodology used here for constructing and assembling the primary data.