

CHAPTER 2

BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH TEACHING IN THAILAND FROM THE MID 19th CENTURY TO THE 1960s AND ITS RELATION TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DURING THAT PERIOD

2.1 Chapter Outline and Main Points

In this chapter I will outline the development of English teaching in Thailand from the mid 19th century until the 1960s. The aim of the chapter is to provide a historical context to our more specific examination of English teaching in the past four decades, and provide points of comparison which could be instrumental in understanding the present and the immediate past. The chapter will be divided into sub-sections based on significant historical periods.

Broadly speaking, one of the central claims in this chapter will be that the history of English teaching in Thailand is connected to the history of Thailand's links to the Western world. By "links to the western world" I refer mainly to the level of participation in the world economy as reflected both by the regulatory environment as well as by the actual level of economic interaction. Positive regulatory environment usually refers to three areas, namely, 1) A body of laws that allow foreigners to engage freely in both trade and investment with entities in the country. 2) Low rate of tariffs and other trade barriers. 3) The provision of infrastructure, in areas such as communication, transport and also language that facilitate these trade and investment activities. Whether actual trade and investment activity actually follow such a positive environment depends on each country's comparative advantages. The claim is, therefore, that periods of increased participation in global trade and investment create strong incentives to the study of foreign languages, and particularly English.

2.2 Prior to the 19th Century

Thailand's opening to Western trading interests dates back to the 17th century and the reign of King Narai. During that reign Siam engaged in intensive diplomatic, military and economic interaction with France, Netherlands, Portugal and, to a lesser extent, Britain. The period of engagement was short, however, and ended with the violent toppling of King Narai in 1688. The usurper, King Petracha, came to power with a clear agenda of limiting, if not eliminating, foreign involvement in the Kingdom's affairs. The period of relative disengagement from world affairs lasted until the early 19th century.

Disengagement from the world was a policy of other countries in the region as well as, for example, Burma and Vietnam. It was one form of reaction to an international political environment that was viewed as threatening. (Rong Syamanada, 1977: 71-83).

2.3 The First Half of the 19th Century until the End of the Fourth Reign

Starting from the early 19th century we see an increased western involvement in Southeast Asia, and this time, unlike in the past, the major role has been played by Great Britain. From its base in India, Britain has expanded its presence in the region propelled by a mixture of security concerns (as was the case in its Burmese wars), but mainly by commercial interests (as was the case in its Opium wars with China in the 1840s as well as its creeping expansion in the Malayan peninsula). The rulers of Siam, noticing this powerful new presence in the region, responded by co-opting rather than opposing it. The relationships between Siam and Britain were formalized in two landmark treaties, the Burney Treaty of 1825 and, more significantly, the Bowring treaty of 1855. Both treaties establish the elements of a positive regulatory environment conducive to the expansion and growth of international trade and investment. The first treaty was signed during the reign of king Rama the 3rd, or Phranangklaio, and the second during the reign of his successor, king Rama the 4th, or King Mongkut. The

timing of this first treaty closely corresponds to the sweeping British victory in the first Anglo-Burmese war, an event which directed the attention of the Siamese king to the growing importance and power of what became its new neighbor to the east. The second treaty was signed a short period of time after Britain managed to force the Chinese empire, following the opium wars, into a series of degrading treaties, to win a second war in Burma and establish a growing presence in Malaya. This established its central role in Asian power politics, and encouraged the rulers of Siam even more than before to co-opt it rather than oppose it. (Rong Syamanada, 1977: 114-121).

The fact of Britain's position as the strongest naval and colonial power in the 19th century, as well as the fact that it was the first of the colonial powers to share borders with Siam were the main reasons why it was the study of English, rather than French, Dutch or other European languages, that became of interest to the rulers of Siam. In any case, it is worth noting that Siam's rulers of this period read the global power map correctly and focused their efforts on English, because the fact of the global British prominence which is so clear to us now was not as obvious at the time that the events took place.

The two major reasons for the study of English cited by King Mongkut during those early days were 1) The need to be able to communicate directly with foreign emissaries rather than relying on foreign interpreters. This became a major issue as negotiations with foreign, particularly British, emissaries, became critical to the vital interests of the Kingdom. 2) As it became clear that western power was founded upon superior science and technology, it became a necessity to acquire the linguistic skills needed to learn western science from the source. The balance between these two primary skills, namely the ability to effect verbal communication on the one hand and the ability to facilitate a transfer of knowledge on the other hand, has been one of the pivotal issues which are at

the heart of the process of deliberation on the shape and course of English teaching in Thailand ever since. (Thailand TESOL, 1983: 7).

While the realization of the importance of English started during the reign of King Rama the 3rd, it was during the reign of Rama the 4th that concrete steps were taken to encourage its teaching. What is most important was the royal leadership in this endeavour. King Rama the 4th studied English himself and with the aid of missionaries even before ascending the throne, and became perhaps the first Thai with a good knowledge of English. Other important developments during the reign of King Rama the 4th were:

- 1) The invitations of English tutors, such as Anna Leonowens, to the court to teach English to the offspring of the king.
- 2) The first cases of sending scholars to study in Europe.
- 3) The first private academy, called "University Siam", founded by the missionary Dr Smith, which offered the study of English and western sciences. A number of graduates of the academy later became high-ranking government officers.
- 4) With the advent of printing technology came the first Thai-English dictionaries, such as the multi-lingual dictionary by Pallegoix, as well as English-study text books designed for Thai students. (Wyatt, 1984: 196-200).

The result of all this activity was that from a position of complete reliance on foreign interpreters, sometimes operating in two levels (as, for example, Thai to Malay and Malay to English, or Thai to Portuguese and Portuguese to English), the Kingdom now had leaders that could understand and converse in English and were supported by a considerably large group of courtiers who possessed similar skills.

2.4 Developments During the Reign of King Chulalongkorn

A major expansion of the study of English in the kingdom took place during the reign of King Mongkut's successor, his son King Chulalongkorn, or Rama the 5th. With the large influx of westerners during the reign of Rama 5, the need for English became more pronounced than ever before. Obviously, King Rama 5 realized the key role that foreign languages and an elite education abroad would play in the modernization of the country. After witnessing the progress in Singapore and Java, he came back to Bangkok with a much broader outlook on things. He was convinced that the path towards progress lay in education, with due emphasis on a working knowledge of English." (Thailand TESOL, 1983: 12).

The expansion of the study of English went parallel to the accelerated process of opening up to the west which took place during this reign. Opening up to the west took two main forms. The first form was that of expanded trade links, a result of the free-trade clauses of the Bowring treaty. The number of foreigners visiting and conducting business in the kingdom grew up dramatically, and these foreigners came to dominate the extracting as well as the trading of commodities such as timber and tin. The second form was through the implementation of a series of reforms initiated by King Chulalongkorn which were aimed at turning the kingdom into a modern state. The rationale was that by becoming more like the Western powers, Siam would be better positioned to prevent attempts at a colonial take-over. The planning and implementation of these series of reforms required considerable import of know-how from the west, and importing this know-how meant that there had to be a significant group of Thais that could understand foreign language, mainly English, texts in various subjects and could communicate with the numerous foreign experts that were brought to the kingdom. King Chulalongkorn applied a policy of spreading the recruitment of experts over a number of Western countries, instead of focusing only on England. This policy of hedging did not,

however, blur the over-all importance of English among the different foreign languages which were used. (Wyatt, 1984: 214-222).

The expansion of the study of English during the reign of King Chulalongkorn served one important additional aim to the two listed above. This aim was closely linked with the broader goal of creating an infrastructure which is favorable to foreign traders and investors. Many of the administrative reforms implemented by King Chulalongkorn, as well as the construction of railways and telegraph lines, were also aimed at providing such an infrastructure. The knowledge of English among at least an adequate number of people in the ruling and commercial classes is also an element in such an infrastructure. The underlying assumption of this aim is that foreigners engage with the country on a broad front, and, very often, from within the country itself. The two objectives for the promotion of English studies that were mentioned earlier assume an engagement on a narrow front, namely with emissaries and with scholars or their written texts. The foreigners in this type of engagement are assumed to be primarily outside the Kingdom. With the expansion of the role of English came also a heavy requirement for financial resources. The financial cost of providing English teaching to a small elite group was a different matter than the cost of offering it to broader population segments, particularly if education abroad was still a major means towards that goal. This challenge was studied in detail by Phraya Wisut Suriyasak, the Thai ambassador in London. In his report on this subject he contended that "there was no way to diminish these expenses (on the education of Thai students abroad) other than to attack the problem at home, to shift the focus away from learning from the west in Europe and toward learning from the west in Thailand...He recommended three broad measures by which this could be accomplished. First, a primary objective should be to build up a substantial fund of textbooks, designed to introduce Thai students to the mysteries of the west through the medium of their own language....Wisut's second recommendation was that the quality and quantity of English language instruction in Thailand be substantially

increased....Wisut's third and final recommendation was that the Thai educational system be made as commensurate as possible with the English system, making transfer from one system to the other more convenient" (Wyatt, 1969: 202-4)

King Chulalongkorn's view of the importance of English can be demonstrated in a letter written by the Thai ambassador to Britain, in which he claims that "Thailand's lag behind the west was only temporary and once his nation had mastered necessary sciences and techniques and had firmly established them in Thailand the urgency of this one sided cultural and technical exchange would diminish considerably" (Wyatt, 1969:202). The letter goes on to claim that "the key to the whole problem was that western knowledge was encapsulated in western languages, making it imperative that it is approached through these languages" (Wyatt, 1969:202).

The importance of English knowledge during the reign of King Chulalongkorn can also be evidenced by the fact that a ruling was issued which exempted students who completed English Schools Standard Two from military service. Such a ruling is an evidence for intention of expanding the study of English beyond the ruling classes, which are in any case not subject to military conscription. This means that the target of this proposed incentive is the middle or low classes.

While King Chulalongkorn acknowledged the importance of English for the advancement of Thai interests, he also saw it in measured perspective and rejected some suggestions that were made to make it into the main language of education in Thailand. (Thailand TESOL, 1983: 13-14). In fact, King Chulalongkorn's approach was that English education should be conditioned on achieving a satisfactory level of knowledge of Thai. This corresponds to the objectives of English education being the transmission of western science and technology and mediating between western and Thai diplomats and trade leaders. Obviously, achieving these goals requires that the

Thai speaker of English has good command of Thai. We should also remember one additional factor behind the desire to have mastery of Thai as a precondition to the study of English, namely, that Thai was spoken mainly in Bangkok and the central region, while the challenge was still there to absorb the regions into one unitary state and to turn Thai into the first language of the majority of the population.

King Chulalongkorn's first practical step was to establish an English language school in the court. In 1872 he hired Francis Patterson as a teacher to offer instruction in reading, writing and speaking English. Patterson, however, did not speak Thai, a fact that negatively affected his ability to communicate with students and the school closed down after only three years in existence. During its short existence the school instructed important figures such as Prince Damrong, later the minister of interior, Prince Tewawong, later the minister of foreign affairs, and Prince Wachirayan, later the supreme patriarch. (Wyatt, 1984: 216-225).

Five years later, in 1878, the American missionary Samuel McFarland was granted a royal permission to establish an English school at the Nantha-Uthayan palace. Its target population was broader than the earlier palace schools and its purposes were limited to "training in reading, writing and hand-writing sufficient for clerks. It might also offer such instruction in mathematics and the arts and sciences as might be useful to the country" (Wyatt, 1969: 77). The fact that the school was headed by a missionary, coupled with its relative distance, stood in its way of getting acceptance by the royal and noble elite. The school, which was later moved to the Sunanthalai estate, came to be popular amongst Chinese trading families and commoners. Most of the school's graduates developed commercial careers, while only a minority gained government positions. (Wyatt, 1969: 85).

As for the need to enhance English training among the royal elite, this was achieved through the addition of English to the curriculum of the royal school, Suan Kulap, in 1881. While existing in the first few years as an alternative course designed for students who planned to continue studying abroad, English studies were accepted, by the mid 1880s, as an integral part of the school curriculum. Until 1890 the two languages were taught concurrently, with each being allocated half of each day. Only in the early 1990s did Prince Damrong institute the regulation that required the study of Thai to reach an acceptable level before English study was to commence. This effectively created a clearly defined English study standard that was added to the government's curriculum and examinations. (Wyatt, 1969: 315-316).

While the school at Suan Kulap became the most prominent center of English instruction during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, we do see a proliferation of other English schools which were opened in the 1890s, catering to different segments of the demand for English. For example, in 1897 a school called Ratchwitthayalai or "King's College" was opened in Thonburi with a 4-6 year course based on the Education ministry's curriculum. Enrollment in the school was high and graduates won numerous King's scholarships for studies abroad. At the same period, namely 1898, four other English schools are recorded by the ministry of Education. All four relied mainly on student's fees and all four focused primarily on English instruction. Of the four schools, one was the successor to McFarland Sunanthalai school, now renamed as the "Anglo-Siamese School". Another one, at Wat Mahannapharam, was oriented almost exclusively to Chinese students. A third one, at Wat Suthat, was an English evening school teaching only English. The fourth was a girls boarding school for the upper social elite. (Wyatt, 1969: 317).

In other words, we see that the private industry of providing English instruction dates back to the reign of King Chulalongkorn, reflecting a demand for English which is fed by

the opening up to foreign trade and investment and by internal reforms designed to shape the country in a more western mould. The important questions of how English should relate to Thai in the formal curriculum were already addressed during that time, and the course adopted was to remain in place for nearly a century, being that English instruction should come only after a sufficient level of knowledge in Thai has been gained: "In June 1902, the ministry began to enforce a rule long since pronounced but never before implemented: it was forbidden in government schools to teach foreign languages (i.e. English) to pupils until they had completed their Thai primary education. It was this rule that was applied in closing the old Anglo-Siamese School and in reorganizing King's College"(Wyatt; 1969:317). But the phenomenon of English evening schools or English schools oriented primarily to the commercial community, are already evident, though on a small scale. The limited number of schools teaching English at that period should be appreciated when compared to the preliminary nature of the school system in general.

2.5 Developments During the Sixth and Seventh Reign

The successor of King Chulalongkorn, King Vajiravuth (1910-1925), followed by King Prachdipok (1925-1934) were both brought up and educated in the West. Obviously, they had a strong orientation towards enhancing the study of English. During the reign of King Vajiravuth some changes were made to the curriculum which strengthened the role of English. Whereas in the period of Chulalongkorn a child could not be registered to study English without having passed Thai studies at a level equivalent to upper primary school, namely, there was a minimum of knowledge in Thai before one could study English, this requirement was relaxed during the reign of King Vajiravuth. The curriculum requirements were changed so that English instruction depended more on the abilities of the teacher himself. (Thailand TESOL, 1983: 24-27).

Furthermore, we find during that period that English was allotted the highest number of weekly learning hours in the school curriculum, reaching 7.5 weekly hours in the intermediary secondary curriculum. This can be compared to 5 weekly hours allotted to Thai and mathematics, and only 3 hours for other subjects. (Thailand TESOL, 1983: 24-27).

During this period the importance of the formal education system grew dramatically due to the 1921 Compulsory Education Act, which required all students from the age of 8 to 14 to attend elementary school. English became a compulsory subject to be studied after grade 4. This act effectively increased the number of students exposed to English teaching dramatically, even though one has to take into account that policy and implementation were not fully synchronized, and that it took many decades before the vision of universal education was achieved. (Wyatt, 1969: 209).

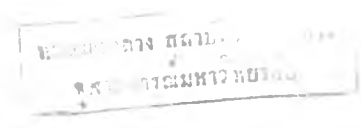
Another important development that took place during the reign of King Vajiravuth has been the establishment of Chulalongkorn University in 1917. That was the first time in which an academic institution of this type has been established in Thailand, and, as it opened the opportunity for a much larger group of people to further their studies, it also created, among these people a stronger need to have a working knowledge of English sufficient to read and comprehend the required textbooks, which were mostly in English. The existence of a western type of university in Thailand both created a need for English, but also answered that need through its own extensive program of English studies. (Wyatt, 1969: 182).

The important developments during the 6th reign are therefore the enhanced status of English in education on the one hand, and, more importantly, the creation of a national formal system of education that covers both a compulsory elementary school system and a university modeled upon the West.

Both the 6th and 7th reign are periods in which Thailand was still open to international trade and investment. On the one hand, it is noteworthy that the external threats which led to this opening up of the economy have been eliminated following the treaties signed with France and Britain in 1907 and 1909 respectively, and some of the extra territorial rights formerly held by most European powers have been rescinded after the first world war. But, on the other hand, the elite and the rulers of Thailand were mostly educated in the west and had strong links to Europe, especially Britain. They therefore continued with policies that were originated during the reigns of their predecessors and were based on the international political realities of their time. It was during this time that the presence of colonial firms in the Kingdom began to take the distinct form of the compradore system: "A compradore system had developed together with the expansion of free trade between Europe and China after the Opium War. When European merchants advanced into the free ports of China, they immediately found such formidable obstacles in expanding their trade as different commercial practices and language barriers, as well as limited information on local markets. Europeans thus employed educated, English-speaking Chinese merchants as intermediaries between European firms and local suppliers and customers. Europeans also introduced the compradore system into Thailand s for similar reasons" (Akira, 1996: 87). The development of this system, with its pattern of economic domination composed of two layers of foreign presence: western and Chinese, led to a reaction against this foreign dominance and a rise of nationalist policies, which were promoted by the group which brought about the change in regime in 1932.

2.6 From the Rise of the Kanna Rassadorn in 1932 until the Late 1950s

The change in regime of 1932, and the toppling of the absolute monarchy brought to power a completely different group of people. While the core of the group of "instigators" were Thais who studied in France, where they acquired radical ideas, the



orientation of the group as a whole was much less internationalist than the preceding royal regime. More significantly, their rise to power was fed by the economic hardships which came as a result of the 1929 financial crisis. That crisis was a major setback to the system of open international trade and investment that flourished from the middle of the 19th century. The crisis made clear the fragility of the system and the risk of specializing, within that system, on the production of a limited number of internationally traded commodities. It was this system, and the pressure to accept its rules of open trade, which brought about Thailand's opening up to the west, bringing with it a keen need to master the most important language of international trade and international knowledge. (Baker, Pasuk Phongpaichit, 1997: 116).

The collapse of the system brought an orientation towards nationalist policies and the closing of the open door policies of the past. Nevertheless, even though the general orientation of the Kanna Rassadorn was nationalistic, promoting domestic capitalism was not necessarily very high on its agenda: "The rising domestic entrepreneurs supported the 1932 revolution in the hope that the new government would promote domestic business against colonial competition. But the 1932 revolutionaries believed that the main task of economic planning was improving the fortunes of the peasants who formed the mass of the population. In Pridi's thinking, this priority meant that measures to promote urban business were a secondary concern" (Baker, Pasuk Phongpaichit, 1997: 117).

The interest of senior members of the Kanna Rassadorn in the well being of the Thai farmers, contrasted with animosity not only towards colonial or western economic interests but also against the local capital which was dominated by recent immigrants from China: "Among the military faction in the People's party, which came to dominate by the mid-1930s, this anti-capitalist thinking prevailed. In their view, urban business was a threat to the peasant. By extension, the Chinese who dominated urban business

were an outside force, foreign in origin, and hence lacking in legitimacy" (Baker, Pasuk Phongpaichit, 1997: 118). In that sense, the nationalist streak of the Kanna Rassadorn went deep and was an important force to be reckoned with.

We therefore have two major developments: 1) The collapse of the world financial system in 1929, leading to a retreat of the world's free trade environment. 2) The coming to power of a new power group with an inward looking, fervently nationalist orientation. But coming to analyze the effects of these developments on the state of English teaching in Thailand, we have to take into account a third important factor, which is the fact that the new regime brought with it a democratic agenda. A part of that agenda was to expand the benefits of education rapidly to the majority of the population, regardless of class or level of wealth. The result was, at the first stage, an attempt to expand the study of English to a much larger group of students. As Areerat Nampetch notes (1987: 98-99) "English at this period...has been included in every curriculum and in every level, even in the elementary school level, according to the curriculum of 1937." This original thrust towards the expansion of the study of English, reflecting the democratic ideology of the "Kanna Rassadorn" later slowed down in reflection of the rise, within its ranks, of Marshal Pibul Songkram and his nationalistic ideology. As this nationalistic policy moved from a populist to a semi-fascist orientation, the interest in promoting the teaching of English to the masses was negatively effected. As noted, the advent of the Japanese in 1941 has brought about a complete cessation of English teaching in Thailand.

It is clear that the first two goals of English studies established during the fourth reign were achieved long ago. The country's leadership had no difficulty in communicating in English with other leaders of other nations, and there were enough people with English proficiency that could translate the treasures of western knowledge for the benefits of Thai. The third goal, that of establishing a broad ranged "infrastructure" of English speaking Thais which could communicate with a large number of foreigners that engage

with the Kingdom in various trade and investment activities, went into recess. Such a broad ranged engagement was not a priority anymore.

There is little information about educational policies in general and the development of English curriculum in particular, following the 1932 change of regime. We do know that in 1937, a new syllabus was introduced in secondary schools. The syllabus stated that reading and speaking must be taught together with grammar and translation. What was meant by reading in this syllabus was the ability to read with correct pronunciation and the ability to understand the set texts" (Thailand TESOL,1983: 30). This amendment in the syllabus was the first turn away from the simplistic grammar-translation method of teaching which was dominant until then and remained the main approach until the curriculum revision of 1960.

What is also certain is that as the reliance on foreign experts and the involvement of foreign traders and business operators in the Kingdom went into decline, the demand for English and for English speakers have also diminished, or at least have lost the sense of urgency which it had during the time of the absolute monarchy. The lack of any data as to the opening of new English schools during the post 1932 periods perhaps indicates that not much private sector activity took place in that area.

During the Japanese occupation of Thailand from 1941-1945 the study of English was completely banned by the Japanese and was discontinued. Again, not much information is available from that period, but quite obviously, the ban on teaching English did not constitute a major shock to the educational system, indicating that its roots in the system must have been quite shallow. (Thailand TESOL,1983: 33).

Following World War 2, the teaching of English in schools was reinstated, with no major changes applied to the curriculum. The first major change to the English curriculum

following World War 2 has been the curriculum of 1960, which I present in detail in the next chapter. However, "in the 1950's Thailand received a great deal of foreign aid in the field of English language learning, for example, from the Columbo Plan, the British Council, the United States Educational Foundation in Thailand, the Binational Center, at least two International Cooperation Administration University contracts- Indiana and Michigan. UNESCO also devoted time and personnel, as did the Asia Foundation" (Thailand TESOL, 1983: 28-29). The massive foreign aid, coming in numerous levels and in many different ways, culminated in the 1960s curriculum revision. As we shall see in the next chapter, this major curriculum revision incorporated the advice of foreign experts who were deeply involved in the process of drafting it, both at the level of the main principles as well as in the fine details of textbook writing.