Teaching English in Rural Schools: Reflections and Best Practices

Professor Dr. Ambigapathy Pandian *

“There are countless ways in which we who teach might come to a deeper, broader, and richer understanding of what we do. Some of these ways entail looking at teaching differently, seeing it in a new light, coming to appreciate its complexity more than we have done as yet …”

(Jackson, 1992:67)

Abstract

In the age of globalization and information, education is a major indicator of human development. The challenge in education becomes critical when English is becoming a globally accepted language of communication and networking in the workplace and in the public domains. Knowledge workers of the Information and Communication Age would not be able to participate effectively in global and local production of knowledge if they do not master the English Language. However, the practices of teaching English remain very problematic in many parts of Asia, including Thailand, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Malaysia.

This paper reports the challenges faced in an intervention project led by the International Reading Association in Bangladesh and in Pakistan. The project aimed to empower teachers by engaging them with the IRA three-phase model for English Language learning that propounds the following - Phase 1: Activate Background Knowledge; Phase 2: Constructing Meaning and Phase 3: Evaluate and Apply. The project brought two foreign and two local instructors and twenty-six EFL teachers who worked together to develop practical and relevant approaches to inform and design English teaching practices on reading for secondary schools in Bangladesh. The discussion looks at several barriers that emerged in the implementation of the project, namely the limited economic resources, the preference for conventional and autocratic classrooms and teachers’ negative attitudes toward the English language.

* Deputy Dean (Research and Post-Graduate Studies) at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia.
This paper also presents a sample of a lesson plan on reading developed by the project participants. It demonstrates how the barriers to EFL learning were confronted to not only enhance the teachers’ knowledge and competence but also to strengthen their voices in developing EFL pedagogy. The reflections and experiences presented can be instructive to teachers in many countries, including Thailand.

Introduction

The past decades have witnessed major changes in the living and learning environment confronting young teachers in many parts of Asia. Educating students in rural school districts in these parts of Asia has always held both challenge and opportunity. Among other challenges, the sometime vast distances between schools and districts may affect student access to special programs, teacher access to professional development and collegial support, and administrator access to financial resources. Rural school populations may also face the combined challenges of low-income, isolation from city centers experiencing rapid development, isolation from job-growth centers, deteriorating public facilities, inability to attract teachers and a heavy concentration of households living in poverty.

The fact that we are currently residing in a world that is linked to changes taking place in the global communication and learning systems, puts forward a new range of challenges that are re-shaping our daily lives (Kalantzis and Cope, 2005). It is here that the agenda on English language teaching and learning is critical as English is not only the lingua-franca of international commerce, science, engineering and technology, but also the accepted language of communication and networking (Singh, Kell & Ambigapathy, 2002).

This presentation first provides some key issues facing teaching and learning of English in the present times, focusing specifically at the teacher factor. Secondly, it describes an intervention project taken in Bangladesh and in Pakistan. The discussion then looks at the International Reading Association’s three phase model for English language teaching and learning. Following this, the paper presents sample lessons on reading developed by the teachers in Bangladesh. The reflections and experiences presented can be instructive to teachers in many countries, including Thailand.

English in the Digital Age

In the past decade, Asia is also experiencing dramatic changes related to global social, economic, cultural and technological changes that have happened in the past few years. In the arena
of education, English language teachers continue to come to grips with the developments having arisen from English accepted as a critical learning subject in our everyday lives (Ambigapathy, 2005). Indeed there is a concern that English proficiency among school and university students is in a dismal state. Many professional groups as well as political parties have reiterated the need to improve English language proficiency among students (Ambigapathy, Muhammad Kamarul & Sarjit, 2005). The major concern here is that these students who will become the knowledge workers of the Information and Communication Age would not be able to participate effectively in global and local production of knowledge if they do not master English Language. The focus on English language is critical; a key thrust in Asia’s economic growth banks on the knowledge economy, which requires workers who are not only multi-skilled and committed to information technology (IT) but also versatile in English to lead future national and global development Ambigapathy, Kell, Sarjit & Chakravarthy, 2005).

The decline in the standard of English may be primarily linked to four issues namely policy, pedagogy and teaching methods, student interests and teacher proficiency. The discussion of the first three issues, whilst significant is dealt briefly here. Greater emphasis is given to teachers and the more direct setting of the English classroom (Lovat, 2003). The major focus, in this discussion, falls on teachers and their role in the teaching of English. This is because evidence indicates that the teachers’ attitudes have a notable influence on their professional practices (Ambigapathy, 2004a). It needs to be recognized that in the world of education, though teachers do the main work of sustaining the existing standard of English, teachers are also central to the advancement of this language. Teachers have a measure of autonomy over what they teach what image they seek to portray in their classes, what material and resources they use and how these are handled. The choices they make – or not make will have different implications for working towards better proficiency in English (Ambigapathy, 2004b).

This, however, does not mean that the movements taking place in the wider social contexts impinge less forcefully on the teaching and learning contexts in schools. For example, educational policy is crucial to set the framework and direction of English language development in schools. In many parts of Asia, including Malaysia and Thailand, the main medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools is the native language while English is taught as a second language. Over the years English language teaching and learning in Asia has experienced numerous disparities as there
were contesting views on teaching grammar and language structures, communicative aspects, mastering and rote learning of skills. This eroded communicative competence giving rise to a new class of students who could pass examinations and continue to the tertiary level without actually being able to use the English language productively in a communicative event (Ambigapathy, 2003; Singh, Kell & Ambigapathy, 2002). The English syllabuses that were taught in the schools were seen as essentially foreign and reflecting international changes taking place mainly in Britain. Despite the interesting initiatives in structuring English Language teaching, there are problems at the implementation stage and many teachers, scholars and members of the public are still concerned today with the decline in the standard of English, specifically in rural schools. Some of the above experiences may be similar in the Thai context.

In recent years, the importance of English in the advent of the Information Communication Technology Era and globalization is realized and the need to promote English proficiency is seen as critical. However, political, economic and social factors continue to hamper the enhancement of English language teaching. Monetary allocation, lack of motivation on the part of many teachers and students, the perception that English is just a subject in school and not a living language may impede the advancement of English language teaching (Ambigapathy, 1999). While, a top-down approach is crucial to initiate action strategies, clearly political will, more resources, research and planning are also necessary to ensure recovery and progress in this area of English language learning.

The next factor that needs attention is pedagogy and teaching methods which are related to the methods used by teachers in teaching English language. While many teaching methods in this subject have been proposed, the diverse student background has to be considered in thinking about teaching strategies. A study on teaching methods in English reveals that although teachers were exposed to various teaching methods at teaching training colleges and at the universities, the teachers resorted to the ‘traditional’ methods that were used on them when they were students in schools (Ambigapathy, 2000). There was much enthusiasm in implementing approaches set by new curriculum innovations, however classroom teaching mainly adhered to chalk-and-drill methods. Classrooms were teacher-centered and conservative and there were very few teachers who attempted classrooms using songs, games, media, simulation and drama. The intensive focus on examinations appeared to over-shadow the communicative approach and the possibilities of carrying out activities in realistic and contextualized situations. There was this tendency to place priorities on examination
scores. The teachers appeared to believe that the ‘traditional’ methods were effective because it had worked for them. This is because the actual position of communicative approaches, self-access learning, computer assisted language learning, creative and critical thinking skills were open to various interpretation and a lot of hard work. These considerations took a back seat and many teachers attempted to teach to the examination rather than teach the language.

The interest of students towards the learning of English is another factor that is important as their attitudes and aspirations in relation to the language can influence their performance in this area. Findings of a recent study (Ambigapathy, 1999) reveal that students are not interested in the learning of English due to the following reasons:

- Students feel that English is not a significant language, therefore there’s no need to learn it;
- English is associated with western culture and as such there are unfriendly feelings to learning the language;
- Students lose interest in the language when incompetent teachers are assigned to teaching English;
- There is no need to pass this subject to pass national examinations.

The findings of the study provide valuable insights towards students’ views on learning English and it clearly indicated the major challenges confronting schools in working towards building favourable perceptions, attitudes and practices in learning English.

Crucially, it is the teacher factor that attracts most attention in this discussion. It is important to note teachers form a core component of educational settings. The capacities of teachers to deal with change, learn from it and to facilitate students’ learning experiences will be critical for the development of English Language in Malaysia. More than often, teachers have very little to contribute to decisions and action plans with regard to curriculum matters. Scant attention is given to the voices of teachers. As such, little is known about the teachers’ belief systems towards English and the teaching of the language, how they accept, negotiate and resist English language issues and initiatives.

Teaching is a noble job and demands dedication and commitment. Many take up the teaching profession because it is seen, as a half-day’s job, which leaves more time for individuals to manage families or engage in other activities outside school. Teaching is also perceived to be a job that is
limited to the transmission of knowledge in the classroom only. There is an urgent to dispel the myths surrounding the teaching profession. Teaching is a process that involves the production of knowledge as well as building of relationships with different groups of people. One has to fully understand the field and its professional practices to ensure initiatives are taken to create the kinds of spaces where dialogue and collaboration can take place to improve curriculum knowledge. While it is important to acknowledge structural constraints, it is equally important to recognize that teachers are actors that are capable of making room for maneuver to carry out intervention strategies that contribute to advancement of teaching and learning English. To move from the position of exclusion in projecting their thoughts on English language improvement, teachers must learn to transform its whispers of frustration into a voice that can be valued by society.

The teaching profession in the new millennium has taken a more challenging task. In order to breed students that are knowledgeable and informed, teachers require more than the traditional teaching method. How they impart values to students and the motivation that they themselves portray in the classroom is also important to create a holistic generation. There are many contributing factors in student education and development. Governments are constantly reviewing policies and legislation of education to create better learning environments. Parents also stake a major share in student education. Research shows that parents’ involvement will create a positive impact and is proven through academic records and achievements. We know that teachers are also one of the contributing factors in student development and education. One cannot deny the influence a teacher has in moulding the minds of our children. Besides formal education, the teacher plays a critical role in influencing the perception of students towards learning experiences in their lives.

Despite the professional and formal training that they receive, in varied and unique classroom situations teachers would often need to make decisions based on their professional discretion. Such discretion does not merely surface with a year or two of formal training but would depend on the years of experience. For instance when faced with the challenge of teaching a classroom of students from different backgrounds and ability levels, the teachers’ instinctive knowledge about content and students would be a determining factor in the effective selection and presentation of text and materials. Assessment of students’ progress would also depend on the teachers’ knowledge of the subject matter and their commitment to teaching their students. The decisions made and the skills with which they are executed are often a complex interplay between the teachers’ practical knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, professional considerations and knowledge about curriculum as well as syllabus
specifications. Collectively these may be termed as their declarative knowledge. Nevertheless many teachers fail to deliver in the classroom when there is an abject gap between their declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge.

An important determining factor often over looked is the teachers reliance on their own personal experience as a student. Instinctive decisions and thoughts made in reaction to a classroom situation ‘may hark back to a situation in which she herself was a student’ (Kalantzis and Cope, 2005). This instinctive reaction known as ‘situated knowledge’ is derived from the teachers’ own learning experience as a student. The experiences as a learner have far reaching consequences for a teacher. Despite their formal training teachers often fall back on what is perceived as the natural and effective way of learning. In other words they believe that what had worked for them would work for their students.

It is also true that in many instances, teachers have very little autonomy to make decisions and actions with regard to curriculum matters (Singh, Kell & Pandian, 2002). Scant attention is given to the voices of teachers. Maybe the conceptions that teachers are merely pawns in the education system have created this norm in society. Hence little is researched and known about the teachers’ belief systems towards the teaching profession, education policies and the real teaching settings and practices in schools (Synder, 2002).

In order to confront the challenges surrounding English language teaching, there is a need to understand teachers and to prepare activities that suit their language teaching needs. Moreover teachers demoralised by policy settings that have disempowered them and curricula that assign them a peripheral role in education need to seek avenues for recognition to lift their self-esteem, morale, motivation and attitude toward teaching English. The Three Phase approach (Paige Ware & Ambigapathy, 2005), was proposed by the International Reading Association (IRA) as possible pathways of engaging the real world. These approaches are supported by sample activities that motivate students to connect learning in real and meaningful ways.

This presentation does not advocate the above approaches as informing defined methods of teaching, or as a prescribed set of materials. Many schools and teachers across Asia are already inventing, exploring and using effective ways of teaching diverse students, utilizing print and newer technologies to produce effective literacy learners that are ready to face the real world. This paper, however, aims to create opportunities for English language teachers to reflect on current teaching practices and to identify those aspects of pedagogy that need to be maintained or strengthened, and to
identify ways in which teaching practices in the English classroom may be enhanced so that this is turn will prepare students for the challenges of the new information economy.

**Approaching the International Reading Association (IRA) Three Phase Model**

Developing literacy materials and practices when resources are scarce is very common in rural areas. My works with IRA in Bangladesh and Pakistan witnessed teachers confronting enormous challenges as the literacy rates are low and the resources limited. Teachers have to resort to innovative and creative methods of enhancing literacy practices in the classroom, especially in establishing a framework for teaching English. In some parts of Bangladesh, papers for writing are in short supply and in one workshop, teachers used the back pages of calendars for developing their materials.

The IRA workshops aim to provide (based on the needs assessment of teachers in their respective areas in Bangladesh and in Pakistan) capacity building of teachers and assistance in the design, development and implementation of a teacher training programme.

The participants of the workshop discussed about new techniques and methods for planning & teaching and how to plan interesting activities.

The workshops participants were very enthusiastic, and they used a variety of activities such as role play, group work, drill, demonstration in their lesson designs. The participants also developed and used variety of teaching aids such as charts, flash cards, posters, brochures, canned food items and other materials encountered in their daily lives. The participants also highlighted major issues faced in rural school settings such as time management, lack of conceptual understanding and language competencies, vague instructions in teaching modules, limited allowed talk and participation of students and class room management. The participants also discussed about logical ways of lesson planning and areas for improvement. The participants were then exposed to the three phase planning model to use in next class which included the following:

**Phase I: Activating Prior Knowledge**

Techniques in this phase remind learners of what they already know about the topic or central focus of the activity. These techniques can help learners assess their background knowledge. They can also
help assess their attitudes about the topic. The techniques in this phase remind learners how the topic connects with their lives and with other topics they have studied. These techniques should encourage learners to be curious about the activity and raise motivation by helping individuals set specific purposes for their participation.

**Phase II: Linking New Information to Prior Knowledge**

Techniques in this phase guide learners in the process of constructing meaning from new information. These techniques guide learners in identifying key ideas and information as they search for answers to their own questions or for ideas to satisfy their own curiosity. This phase includes effective strategies learners use to monitor their learning and techniques to use when the learning process breaks down.

**Phase III: Reflecting on New Information and Applying It to Personal Use**

Techniques in this phase help learners reflect on what they have learned. They may use strategies that help them organize important information, ideas, and relationships. They may use strategies that enable them to apply information to new contexts and situations or to solve problems. These techniques help learners evaluate the validity and reliability of information or to inform their own opinions. In doing all of this, learners come to re-examine their thinking.

**Sample Activity 1 - Learning English Through Reading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Activating Background Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher</strong> (Tr) tells students (Ss) that the day’s lesson is about Reading a text on Deforestation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tr asks Ss about the place they live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tr reads a letter from the textbook on making villagers aware of environmental problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ss discuss the development of their village/town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tr introduces words like environment, pollution, deforestation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ss draw more pictures of trees (based on the earlier ice breaker activity) on the piece of paper and also draw pictures of trees that have been cut/burnt on the other side of the paper.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2: Constructing Knowledge</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ss are given a text on “The Problem of Deforestation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ss read silently before reading aloud in pairs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ss divided into groups (mixed ability group)
Ss from each group are given different exercises (based on the given text):

- Group (Gp) 1 - True/ false exercise
- Gp 2 - Word association
- Gp 3 - Match the phrases
Ss discuss answers

**Phase 3: Applying/Evaluating Knowledge**

Ss submit group written answers.
Ss are asked to reply Arif’s letter accompanied with a poster.
The letters and posters are pasted on the walls of the class.
Sample Activity 2 - Learning English

Prepared by Sarahnaz Kamolika Rahman (English Teacher, Bangladesh)

### Phase 1: Activating Background Knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>Reads a previous lesson from the textbook (The Scientist—page 67) about a scientist who is aware of the problems of boiling water in Bangladesh and wants to solve the problem.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Draws a diagram on the board to help the Ss (see example attached)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ss</td>
<td>Discuss the problem of boiling water and its solution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Phase 2: Constructing Knowledge

| T | Draws 3 columns on board and labels them Know, Want to Know, Learned |
| T | Tells the Ss to draw the columns on their own copy |
| T | Asks the Ss to share information they know and want to learn by asking questions and giving answers in the group. |
| Ss | Are divided into 3 groups (A,B,C of mixed ability) |
| Ss | Each group is given a different text: Group A: Lesson 8, The Experiment Part 1; Group B: The Experiment, Part 2; Group C: The Experiment Part 3 |
| Ss | Read silently before reading aloud in pairs. |
| T | Helps Ss with some questions to start the activity (What’s the scientist using? What’s he doing?) |
| Ss | Share information from their group text with other groups. |
| Ss | Fill in the third column |
| Ss | Look at other group work to see information that they have missed |

### Phase 3: Applying/Evaluating

| T | Gives homework to write 10 sentences about what the scientist was doing or about an experiment they would like to do. |
The IRA shares a common interest, that is the teaching and learning experience must be relevant to the real world and it must be socially situated. Teachers need to identify pedagogies that teach students to analyze tasks, problem solve, identify resources and self-monitor in real-life contexts. A competent teacher will approach the literacy in the English classroom as a self-monitoring, problem-solving activity where the context and purpose of the task are analyzed, a plan of action decided and appropriate resources are identified and assessed (Paige Ware & Ambigapathy, 2005). For example, when planning for the teaching of reading, it is crucial for teachers to identify appropriate content and teaching strategies. As noted by Muspratt, Luke and Freebody (1997), the question to pose is “What are the kinds of reading practices and positions that schools should value, encourage and propagate?” The teachers can then attempt to identify and describe the ways in which individuals use reading as part of their everyday public and domestic life.

**Conclusion**

If English language learners are to fully develop their English and academic language proficiencies, English teaching programmes for teachers must be comprehensive and meet both academic and language proficiency needs. However, schools in rural communities may not have access to adequate numbers of professionally trained and highly qualified staff.

Attracting and retaining qualified teachers has been a long-standing challenge for many rural communities, particularly for those districts that are more remote or disperse. It has been reported that the primary obstacles to attracting and retaining teachers are low salaries, isolation, housing shortages, schools badly in need of repair or modernization, multiple-subject assignments, and limited opportunities for training in the surrounding area. In addition, teachers in rural districts may be asked to teach multiple subjects that they may not be fully qualified to teach. Teacher shortages leading to multiple-subject teaching is an issue for many rural schools (Paige Ware & Ambigapathy, 2005).
Teachers in rural school districts may also have less experience with diverse learners and thus require additional professional development in such areas as second language acquisition and making content accessible to second language learners. However, the physical and cultural isolation associated with rural schools may affect teachers’ access to mentorship and professional development opportunities that would develop their skills in these areas. At the moment, interactive technology or distance learning is not being used in many rural school districts to share and maximize the use of resources among several rural communities, and engage teachers in professional communities.

It is pertinent to stress here that the reason the teachers have joined the teaching profession is to make a difference in the lives of school children. Teaching involves a moral responsibility and teachers need to continually rediscover and renew their skills to respond to the rapid changes in the learning environment. Building students’ character, intelligence and inculcating in them the values that would last a life time is tough business even for the most dedicated teacher, yet John Dewey believes that “The intensity of the desire measures the strength of the efforts that will be put forth.” (quoted in Bone, 1998). Meanwhile, governing bodies and heads of schools should provide a certain amount of autonomy for teachers to exercise control over the curriculum. As the person in the midst of the learning conundrum teachers should be given the opportunity to make changes to the curriculum to maximize learning environments (Baynham, 1995).

Teachers must use real-life, lifelike and focused learning episodes to ensure that students understand how to combine and recombine their available resources in order to engage in effective literacy practices in a range of contexts, using various platforms (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001). The IRA Three phase model might help identify and work through some key questions about the role of English language teaching in making meanings about teaching experiences. The model might not solve all the problems related to English language teaching but it is likely to make teachers feel better about their practices and reap learning gains for students. It is hoped that teachers would be able to use this model as a guide to solve their professional problems.
This paper has attempted to stimulate conversations about literacy by examining the current changes taking place in the world today and by presenting sample activities that can enhance language teaching in the rural schools. It is hoped that teachers may now be in a better position to plan further journeys along the pathways to literate futures. English language teachers, in particular should now use/modify the ideas discussed in this paper to the needs of their students. Ideas are precious commodities, preparation is invaluable, and knowledge is essential when it comes to the pursuit of great achievements. But ideas, preparation, and knowledge are useless without action, because action is the starting point of all progress. It is action that converts an idea into reality. Being a problem solver is a valuable skill. But knowing how to turn problems into opportunities is an invaluable skill. When teachers solve a problem, they are basically treading water. But when they are able to see an opportunity in every problem, and have the ability to transform it into value in the marketplace, we have the potential to achieve exponential success. As the popular saying goes, “Life is meant to be lived, and action is the essence of living.”

References


