IMPROVING ENGLISH EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN THAILAND'S SEMI-RURAL UPPER SOUTH: TOWARD GETTING BETTER RESULTS

Edwin R. Zehner

ABSTRACT

In the mid-2010s, English learners in the area surrounding a regional government university in Thailand's Upper South reported difficulties learning English, and these difficulties appeared to be carrying over into poor performance in undergraduate- and graduate-level English-using classes in the university itself. The search for causes and solutions to this problem led the author to begin engaging with the government administrators who were supervising the provision of English-language instruction in local primary and secondary schools. The present paper presents some of the results of these engagements. It also critiques some of the explanations most commonly offered for the allegedly poor English performance of Thai students relative to students in neighboring Southeast Asian countries, suggesting that underlying realities are more complex than often assumed. Finally, the paper offers some suggestions for addressing the situation more effectively, drawing on the administrators' suggestions and on the author's observations of selected success stories in his own university community.

Keywords: Education, English instruction, Thailand, Southeast Asia, Educational administration

INTRODUCTION – BACKGROUND AND CENTRAL QUESTIONS

This article is an intentionally exploratory study. In its initial formulation, it was meant to be the latest in a series of articles exploring ways to get better results and better motivation from Thai students taking English courses meant to help them acquire the language skills that they needed to succeed in international-level graduate studies in the social sciences and humanities. Noticing that pretty much nothing was working with these students, noticing that most local educators seemed to assume that nothing better was possible, and also noticing that neighboring countries in Southeast Asia were getting better results, the author started expanding his scope.

Thus, an article that begin with the question of how to motivate Thai university students to learn better English expanded to include the question of whether and why Thai English language skills truly lag behind those of their neighbors. As he pursued this second question, and as he noticed the ways Thai students and adults talked about the English instruction they had received prior to university, the author realized that the roots of success and failure in English are probably laid not just in universities. Instead, it is important to pay attention as well to what is done in primary and secondary education (perhaps also in Thailand's three years of pre-primary education, though that was not explored in this paper). Interviews with primary and secondary educators and educational administrators confirmed this hunch, and suggested a range of factors worth exploring in the present article and in future research.

The present article incorporates material from all three of these strains of research—how to motivate university-level learners, critical analysis of common explanations for Thailand's relatively low achievement rates in English, and the question of how primary and secondary education patterns influence outcomes and how they might be improved.

However, the paper's central question has changed. No longer is the author merely asking how to motivate Thai university students to get better at English. In the author's opinion, university and post-graduate study is too late to be addressing this question. Most students who have come this far without mastering English have convinced themselves that they cannot learn the language, no matter what techniques are used. This assumption becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy by de-motivating the students and keeping them from doing the things—often very easy things—that could enable them to get better. In other words, by the time they get to university, they have somehow spent twelve and perhaps fifteen years "learning that they cannot learn English." The question is how to reverse the learning process that leads to that erroneous yet self-fulfilling conclusion. .

Therefore, the paper's central question has become much bigger, yet more poignant. Quite simply, the central question has become this:

> **"What would it take for residents of rural and semi-rural areas of Thailand to become skilled users of English, without having to become rich first."**

That formulation is deliberate. By focusing on semi-rural Thailand, the question (and this study) focuses on precisely the kinds of communities that are supposed to be the primary areas serviced by the author's university, which is itself located in a semi-rural area of southern Thailand. Furthermore, these are the areas whose schools are typically small and underfunded, that have limited means of supplementing the central government's per-pupil funding quotas, and that due to low pay rates and seemingly remote locations have difficulty attracting talented teachers. Futhermore, by including the phrase "without having to become rich first," the question brings to the fore the tremendous socio-economic inequality in Thailand, an system of inequalities that is made ever stronger by the preferential access to private education and extra tutoring services that is available to people with money. Therefore, while I am interested in the lessons that can be learned from high-quality private schools and after-school

tutoring programs, my primary interest is the things that can be accomplished through the system of free (or almost-free) government education. Therefore it is government education, government schools, government administrators, government universities, and the products of these systems that are the primary focus of this essay.

This essay continues to be focused primarily on Thailand, largely because that is where I can examine the relevant issues and details in the fine-grained way that anthropologists like me like to approach them. However, I have made preliminary efforts to compare Thailand's English education systems with those of neighboring countries, and I hope to do more of that in the future. I would especially like to engage in more intensive comparison with Malaysia's English and international education systems, because the outcomes of those systems have markedly improved in the past thirty-three years. As should be clear from the paper's opening pages, the author has noticed remarkable improvements in the breadth and quality of English usage in Malaysia in the past thirty-three years. He assumes that whatever factors produced this change in Malaysian English in just one and a half generations—changes both in the quality of the English and in the local residents' willingness and bravery to use it—should surely be reproducible in semi-rural Thailand. Thus it is with an observation about this remarkable change that the paper begins.

LOW ENGLISH TEST SCORES—STATEMENTS OF THE PROBLEM
CLUES TO THE PROBLEM IN POPULAR MEDIA

It is appropriate that the first presentation of the ideas in this paper should happen at an academic conference in Kuala Lumpur (the 7th Kuala Lumpur International Communication, Education, Language & Social Science (KLiCELS) Conference, on 22 July 2017), because the ideas underlying one of its most important assertions were sparked by observations made when visiting this same city in late 2016.

In Thailand, one frequently encounters newspaper articles and social media posts bemoaning the poor state of Thai secondary and higher education relative to its Southeast Asian neighbors, particularly in relationship to English-language competency. One of the pieces of data frequently cited in this regard is a for-profit English-teaching website (EF SET—see "Digital Resources" section of this article's References Cited list) that—as a way of attracting potential students—offers quick on-line "tests" of English modeled on the formats of the Cambridge Michigan Language Assessment tests (see relevant entry in the "Digital Resources" section of this article's References Cited list) and that gives test-takers instant estimates of where they would place on the A1-C2 scale of competency devised in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In order to drive traffic to the website offering the free English tests, the sponsoring organization published periodic news releases reporting country-by-country averages that had been gleaned from the test scores of the individuals taking tests on the site. These news stories were often written in a way that would catch the attention of readers and opinion leaders in the particular countries in which they were being placed. These stories were often reported in local newspapers or forwarded in local websites, Facebook feeds and other social media in such a way as to suggest that these were objective news stories reporting the results of major national-level studies using objectively defensible statistics. In late 2016, one of these stories was even reported on the Voice of America Learn English website as if it were an independently generated news story (see VoA 2016).

In defense of the company that was producing these stories, I should note that all of the information in the previous paragraph was gleaned from clues found directly in the company's news stories and in its web pages. Strictly speaking, therefore, the company was not entirely engaging in deception, though it was clearly counting on readers' not digging this deeply into its marketing and statistical methods. Furthermore, despite the statistically questionable method by which its test-taking sample was constructed, the results, at least for Southeast Asia, roughly corresponded with what people in the region already expected. Of the ASEAN countries reported in the Voice of America's news story of November 15, 2016 (VoA 2016), test-takers in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines were reported to have the best English skills, being in a proficiency band that the map accompanying the story labeled "high" or "very high." Test takers in Indonesia and Vietnam were at the next level, which the map labeled as "moderate." Meanwhile, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia were labeled "very low," at least two proficiency bands below Indonesia and Vietnam. (No results were reported for Myanmar, and Brunei was not visible on the map.) This information generally matched data that was coming from other sources, which tended to rank Thailand roughly seventh or eighth among the ten ASEAN countries nearly every time a story like this was reported. Regardless of the validity of the statistical databases reported, these results seemed to match local expectations. Many political and educational leaders in Thailand had long been concerned about the generally low levels of English-language competence, and about the problems this would create for the country and its citizens as it sought to compete for business and jobs in an increasingly globalized and interconnected set of economies.

This was by no means the only widely reported news release suggesting that Thailand's students were doing more poorly than its neighbors. For example, on June 11, 2013, the English-language newspaper *The Nation (Bangkok)* published a story suggesting that Thailand's white-collar office workers scored worse in English language assessments than their peers in Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia (*The Nation* 2013). In this case, the source cited was a commercial website called JobStreet.com, which apparently had developed an English Assessment package of its own called JobStreet.com English Language Assessment (JELA). In this case the company offering the test was not seeking to sell English-teaching services. Rather, the organization was a Malaysia-based on-line recruitment website (JobStreet.com, pressrelease92881.htm, viewed 1 May 2017). According to the website, JobStreet's test was a 40-question assessment of 10 questions each in the areas of conversation, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension. According to the website, the test had been developed in order to enable job-seekers to practice their English, and apparently also as a free way for the test-taker to receive an English assessment score that could be listed on the website along with the test-taker's resume or job profile (JobStreet.com 2010).

Even without these news reports, many in Thailand would already have suggested that Thailand citizens' English-language capabilities were lagging behind those of the country's regional neighbors. This was evident even in the nation's most cosmopolitan areas, such as Phuket, Chiang Mai, and Bangkok, and it seemed even more evident in relatively rural areas such as the province that is the home of the university where I teach.

EVIDENCE OF THE PROBLEM IN TEST SCORES

As a seemingly additional confirmation of Thai students' low English-language skills, in the year 2016 a regional university located in southern Thailand administered the so-called "Cambridge Test" of English-language skills (see Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments entry in the "Digital Sources" section of this article's References Cited list) to all of its incoming first-year undergraduate students, and possibly also to its third-year students. The results were never publicly announced, but internal contacts suggested that the students' performance had been very disappointing. Allegedly, all but one of the first-year students tested had scored at the A2 level or below, and that one exception had been a student who had already spent a year as an exchange student abroad. Materials made available by the testing organizations themselves suggest that that the results may have been even worse than this. According to the testing organization, the test that was most likely to have been administered was actually normed to distinguish between test-takers whose skills ranged between the A2 level and the C1 level (see the MET page at the website of the Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments [CaMLA], cited in this article's References section). Since most of this university's students allegedly tested at A2 level or below, this meant that most of those students had English skills that were not even good enough to be properly measured by the testing instrument.

An English skills test administered to students just entering a university could hardly be taken as an indictment of the university's English instruction program, yet it was reportedly being interpreted that way by the university's new administrators. In self-defense, some English instructors complained privately that the test had been administered without prior warning, that reports from students taking the test suggested that the question types were different from any they had taken before, and that the skills being tested—inferential skills, for example—were different from what they were being tested for in their earlier experience with tests of English competence (we may return to this point later).

Nevertheless, it could hardly be argued that the test results were inaccurate. According to the sites maintained by the testing organization, individuals who rank at the A1 level already have at least some competence, but it is minimal. According to information provided on a website maintained by an organization calling itself "Cambridge English Teacher" (see "Digital Sources" section of this article's References Cited section), the lower levels of the six-level CEFR corresponded to the following sets of demonstrable skills, which were phrased in terms of what the website called "can do" statements:

Table 1. CEFR "Can Do" statements for A1, A2, and B1 levels of the CEFR

	Listening	Speaking	Writing
A1	Can understand basic instructions or take part in a basic factual conversation on a predictable topic.	Can understand basic notices, instructions or information.	Can complete basic forms, and write notes including times, dates and places.
A2	Can express simple opinions or requirements in a familiar context.	Can understand straightforward information within a known area, such as on products and signs and simple textbooks or reports on familiar matters.	Can complete forms and write short simple letters or postcards related to personal information
B1	Can express opinions on abstract/cultural matters in a limited way or offer advice within a known area, and understand instructions or public announcements.	Can understand routine information and articles, and the general meaning of non-routine information within a familiar area.	Can write letters or make notes on familiar or predictable matters.

Source: Cambridge English Teacher, web page on the CEFR (see "Digital Resources" section of the References Cited list), which in turn credits the website of ALTE (The Association of Language Testers in Europe) of which Cambridge English Language Assessment is a founding member, but without clarifying what part of ALTE's website listed the "can do" statements that were being quoted in the CET website's table..

Even without the Cambridge-Michigan tests, it would have been easy to determine casually that most of this university's students were at A2 level or below, because few of the students displayed the skills that would suggest B1 competence or above. Indeed, most of them did not even seem to have achieved the A1 level, despite reportedly having passed through at least twelve years of English language instruction at primary and secondary levels. These skills manifested in multiple ways. Most students were avoiding English-language conversations, and even some (though not all) English majors seemed to have difficulty extending conversations beyond a few sentences before lapsing back into Thai. English-language texts assigned for classes were normally not read or else were translated word-for-word via on-line dictionaries (sometimes dividing up the assigned article among members of a study group so that each person would be responsible for only part of the article) with little attempt to grasp the article's overall meaning and purpose. Research assignments in areas like sociology and history tended to explore only Thai-language sources even when the student knew that a richer set of materials was available in European languages. Writing skills were also low. A Thai colleague who taught a class on English skills for use in his particular discipline said that he often felt that if he could get his students to distinguish between a Subject, a Verb, and an Object, he was already having a good day.

All of that said, there should have been little basis for criticizing the English instructors, because a test applied to first year students beginning their first term of university studies was essentially a test of educational competencies in the region's elementary schools and high schools, in this case the high schools—primarily government high schools—of Thailand's fourteen southernmost provinces, an area whose urban centers were expanding rapidly but which was still perceived by many Thai people as being relatively rural and sometimes lacking in financial and educational resources.[1]

Additional evidence, though also analytically flawed, comes from the published country-by-country median scores of the TOEFL ITP tests administered and scored by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) based in Princeton, New Jersey, USA. Each year the ETS publishes "mean scores" attained by the natives of each country in the world. Because these are "mean scores" (arithmetic averages where all the scores are totaled and then divided by the number of test-takers) rather than "median scores" (the mid-point score for each group), the median scores reported here can be expected to be "biased toward the middle" in ways that minimize the differences between countries. However, that "bias toward the middle" is counter-balanced by the use of "percentile" scores, which "rank" each test-taker relative to other test-takers. For example, a test-taker scoring 497 on the TOEFL ITP in 2015 would have been at a 62 percentile (scoring better than 62 other test-takers in a normal random sample of 100 test-takers). Meanwhile, a test-taker scoring 517 on the TOEFL ITP that same year would be at a 72 percentile, thereby jumping past 10 other test-takers through only a 20-point increase in score (Educational Testing Service [ETS] 2016:7).
When ranked in terms of percentiles, the major nations of Southeast Asia came out as follows (raw scores are also given).

**Table 2. Raw scores and percentiles of Southeast Asian nations
on the TOEFL ITP (paper-based) test of English skills**

Country	Mean Score	Percentile	%ile rank
Singapore	570	90.0	1
Philippines	535	79.5	2
Malaysia	532	78.0	3
Burma/Myanmar	489	58.0	4
Indonesia	480	54.0	5
Vietnam	467	46.0	6
Thailand	**466**	**45.7**	**7**
Cambodia	463	44.0	8
Laos	412	19.0	9

Source: Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2016:6)

In Table 2, Singapore is ranked near the top (percentile of 90.0), with the Philippines (79.5) and Malaysia (78.0) following close behind. Thailand ranks near the bottom of this group (45.7 percentile), while performing not nearly as poorly as Laos (19.0 percentile).

When the Southeast Asian nations are ranked together with a set of other nations from southern and eastern Asia (China, Japan, and India, for example), the gap between Singapore/ Malaysia/ The Philippines and the remaining Southeast Asian countries becomes even clearer:

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[1] When I say "regional" and "southern Thailand," I mean primarily the provinces extending from Chumporn province in the north to the Malaysian border in the south. Very few of this university's undergraduate students came from areas outside those two provinces.

**Table 3. Raw scores and percentiles of Southeast Asian nations (in boldface)
compared to a selection of other Asian nations**

Country	Mean Score	Percentile	%ile rank
Singapore	**570**	**90.0**	**1**
Philippines	**535**	**79.5**	**2**
Malaysia	**532**	**78.0**	**3**
Pakistan	517	72.0	4
Hong Kong	513	71.0	5
India	499	62.7	6
Taiwan	494	62.7	7
Bangladesh	490	58.5	8
Burma/Myanmar	**489**	**58.0**	**9**
Nepal	487	56.0	10
Korea (south)	486	55.7	11
Indonesia	**480**	**54.0**	**12**
China (PRC)	480	54.0	13
Vietnam	**467**	**46.0**	**14**
Thailand	**466**	**45.7**	**15**
Cambodia	**463**	**44.0**	**16**
Japan	460	43.0	17
Macau	458	41.3	18
Laos	**412**	**19.0**	**19**

Source: Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2016:6)

As can be seen in Table 3, the three countries of Singapore, Philippines, and Malaysia cluster near the top of this table, while Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia cluster near the bottom.

However, though these figures appear to confirm the general impression of low test score performance by Thai students, it should be noted that there are methodological problems in using the TOEFL ITP scores this way. First of all, as is the case in the widely-used "Cambridge" and "Michigan" tests, the TOEFL ITP test measures only the middle part of the CEFL scale, roughly from A2 to C1, the same as the Michigan test. Second, the TOFL ITP test is not universally accepted by higher education institutions in places like the United States, Britain, and Australia; therefore, it is possible that each nation's most competent English users opted for other tests such as the IELTS or the computer-based or internet-based versions of TOEFL. Third, at least in rural southern Thailand, the lower end of the test-taking community was opting out of the TOEFL ITP test-taking sample entirely, for fear of "failing" the test by scoring lower than hoped. Finally, at least in 2015, the TOEFL ITP was not yet widely and regularly available outside of Thailand's urban centers (this may have been true of some other countries as well), and this may have suppressed participation by residents of areas where educational support systems were relatively weak.

All of that said, the general impression of educators and social critics—supported at least partially by statistical data of varying levels of validity—was that Thailand's students were probably lagging behind their peers in other Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, it appeared that more must be done in order for the average Thai university graduate to compete on increasingly globalized (and English-using) job and business markets both at home and abroad.

POTENTIAL MACRO-LEVEL CAUSES: SOME STATEMENTS AND CRITIQUES
Some observers in Thailand have suggested that Thailand's relatively poor performance on formal testing and other indicators of English language competence is a direct result of the nation's history as the only nation in Southeast Asia not to have been directly colonized. Though this freedom from direct colonization is an achievement of which nationalist Thai historians continue to be proud, some have begun to suggest that the history of not being colonized may have disadvantaged Thailand's contemporary citizens in the area of acquiring English competency. According to this line of reasoning, countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines hold a relative advantage over Thailand because of their years of tutelage in British- and American-shaped educational systems, and the presumed positive effects of this English language usage likely explains their citizens' relative competence today. In other words, says the argument, due to colonization by Britain or the United States, these nations' citizens would already have had relatively high levels of English at the time of independence, and those advantages have persisted up until the present day.

Even on the face of it, this argument has some major flaws. For one thing, although Thailand indeed seems to lag behind the former British colonies of Malaysia and Singapore and the former American colony of the Philippines, the "we have never been

colonized" argument fails to explain why Vietnam and Indonesia seem to be doing so much better than Thailand in fostering English language skills among their populations. Indonesia, it may be remembered, was a Dutch colony, not an English-speaking one. Vietnam had been a French colony, and although the southern part of that nation would have been exposed to English speakers during the Vietnamese-American War, the same would not have been true in the north. Furthermore, there was a significant presence of American troops in Thailand from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, and even after the American bases were closed in 1975, America soldiers continued coming to Thailand for Rest and Recreation. In addition, once the bases had closed, increasing numbers of English-speaking foreigners were coming to Thailand each year, providing additional opportunities for cross-linguistic contact. Increasing numbers of English-speaking foreigners have also been marrying into Thai families (see, e.g., Patcharin 2012, 2013), or retiring in Thailand, and increasing numbers of Thai have been moving to English-speaking countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. Yet the impact of all these things on overall English fluency within Thailand has been minimal.

Another problem with the "Thailand was never a colony" explanation for Thai students' relative weakness in English language acquisition is that it overlooks Thailand's historical status as what many scholars have come to call a "semi-colony." This term, whose first appearance in writing about colonial-era Thailand appeared in the work of Thai Marxist historians around the year 1950 (see Thongchai 2011:24, n. 12, who cites Aran 1950a, Aran 1950b, and unnamed contemporary sources from the Communist Party of Thailand), has come into widespread use among historians of all kinds in the early 2000s, especially in writing about formally uncolonized polities such as China (e.g., He 2010, Pan 2009, Walker 1999), Turkey (e.g., Ergil 1979), and Thailand (e.g., Hong 2003, 2204; Jackson 2004, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Thongchai 2011; Warren 2015). As used within specifically "postcolonial" discourse, the term "semi-colonial" often refers to the lingering economic and cultural influence of the Western colonial powers. However, as used in recent scholarly discourses on Thailand, the term also references the widely known fact that during the period of high colonialism the Kingdom of Siam (as Thailand was then known) was at least partly "self-colonized" (to reference another widely used term), inviting British technical and ministerial advisors to help implement modern infrastructural and capital improvements, borrowing elements of European colonial administrative system to more effectively subordinate its own populations to centralized rule (the Dutch administration of Indonesia in the 1890s is most frequently cited as a model consciously referenced by Siam's ruling elite at the turn of the twentieth century), a system of "unequal treaties" that granted "extraterritoriality" (the right to be tried in the courts of their home countries or colonial masters) to residents who were citizens of territories ruled by various European powers, a general opening of the country to global trade under terms dictated by foreign powers, and an increasing tendency to model national educational systems on the curricula used in European countries. Thus it was that Thailand transformed itself in ways that somewhat paralleled changes that were happening in neighboring European colonies, sometimes being aided by European personnel, especially British technical advisors hired by the Siamese monarchy. In addition, by the early 1900s many of the country's elite were educated in European languages, especially including English and French, and were starting to translate European-language literatures into Thai.

[Note: Another, more plausible, explanation for the relative strength of English in Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines was offered to the author on June 16, 2017. The speaker who offered this explanation is a Thai academic who specializes in writing software to support the construction of databases and to support the long-distance delivery of educational instruction. He noted that each of these three countries are ethnically diverse, and each of the component communities may prefer to use English as a *lingua franca,* instead of learning each other's languages, whereas in Thailand (as noted in Smalley 1994), there has somehow developed a sense that all communities share "ownership" of Standard Thai as their shared national language. In the opinion of this author, the person's suggestion has sufficient merit to be worth exploring in future work. In each of these countries there are additional contextual factors that also contribute to the relatively widespread use of English. Nevertheless, this person's suggestion may have partial explanatory power, especially for the educated but non-elite levels of society.]

Yet this elite-level competency in English failed to trickle down very well to the common people, both in the early twentieth century and in the present day. This is not due in any way to a general devaluing of English as a potentially valuable foreign language. Quite the contrary. Noted linguist William A. Smalley, a long-term observer of socio-linguistic relationships in Thailand (an interactive set of linguistic relationships that he called "Language Ecology"), observed in 1994 that by the mid-1980s English had become the nation's "external" language. More specifically, he wrote:

> Thailand as a nation has two languages, Standard Thai and Standard English. The first is the internal language of the nation, the second its external language.
> Standard Thai is a major national symbol, the official language. . . .
> English, on the other hand, is the primary language that the nation uses in its external contacts. It is the language of international politics, advanced education outside the country, international media, culture and tourism. *It is also a language which Thai people universally study in school.* (emphasis added)
> . . . .
> Degrees of competency in Standard Thai [which for most Thai continues to be a language learned in school rather than the language used at home] range from zero to highly skillful among Thai citizens. *Correspondingly, much smaller numbers manifest skills in English. But whether skillfully used or not, both languages are crucial to the country. Both are at the core of its linguistic diversity and national unity.* (Smalley 1985:25, emphasis added)

At another point, Smalley outlined the minimum weekly hours of Thai language and English language instruction in Thailand's schools in the year 1986. By that point, the following number of hours could be reported:

**Table 4. Minimum weekly hours of Thai-language and English-language instruction
in Thailand's schools, in the year 1986**

Educational Level	Hours/Wk Thai Instruction	Hours/Wk English Instruction
Lower elementary	7	---
Upper elementary	4	3–5
Lower secondary	4	4–6
Upper secondary	3–5	6–8

Source: Smalley (1994:23)

As this table shows, at the upper levels of instruction, in the year 1986 there were actually *more* hours a week given to formal English language instruction than were given to Thai language instruction. Yet in most cases the outcomes were poor.

Dr. Smalley's book did not specify where his information came from, and it is approximately 30 years out of date in any event. However, in early 2017 I was able to obtain the national requirements from a local office (known formally as สำนักงานเขตพื้นที่—*samnak-ngaan khet phuuen thii*—"Education Service Area Office") supervising elementary education in several of the districts closest to my university. According to the *Basic Education Core Curriculum of B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008),* (Thailand Ministry of Education 2008), the minimum weekly and annual hours of instruction for Thai and for English (labeled as "Foreign language" but meaning "English") were now as follows:

Table 5. Minimum hours of instruction in Thai and in English, as of early 2017

Educational Level	Thai Language Instruction		English Language Instruction	
	Hours/week	Hours/year	Hours/week	Hours/year
Grades 1-3	5	200	1	40
Grades 4-6	4	160	2	80
Grades 7-9	3	120	3	120
Compulsory Education Ends at Grade 9, but education is free through Grade 12				
Grades 10-12	6	240	6	240

Source: Thailand Ministry of Education (2008:25)

In addition, a recent proclamation from the Thailand Ministry of Education (issued October 2016) required that elementary schools increase the English language instruction for Grades 1 through 3 from 1 hour per week (40 hours per year) to 5 hours per week (200 hours per year), beginning with the second semester of the school, which was to begin shortly after the proclamation was promulgated. However, educational administrators with whom I interacted in early May 2017 informed me that the new regulations were so far being implemented only in those schools that "had the capability," as some primary schools did not have enough English teachers to implement the new rule immediately. I also suspect that these schools, many of whom had very small enrollments and minimal teaching staffs, would also have lacked the budgets to rapidly hire new instructors capable of teaching the increased hours. This in turn led me to wonder how much of the other parts of the core curriculum were being taught in accordance with government regulations.

Furthermore, the number of hours devoted to English instruction in Thailand are in some cases *higher* than the number of hours reported in some countries that were supposedly scoring higher. For example, for Vietnam, I have been informed that the number of hours of instruction are as follows:

Table 6. Minimum hours of English instruction in Vietnam, as of early May 2017

Educational Level	English Language Instruction		
	Times/week	Minutes/time	Minutes/week
Grades 1-6	2	40	80
Grades 7-12	3	45	135

Source: Anonymous Communication Received 13 May 2017
Thanks to Nguyen Thi Chiem and friends for helping me access this information.

The number of class periods in upper elementary school (Grades 4-6) and lower secondary school (Grades 7-9) appear to be the same as Thailand, while in upper secondary school (Grades 10-12) the number of hours of study appear to be twice as high in Thailand as it is in Vietnam. The person providing the information went on to note, however, that families in Vietnam tend not to rely solely on government schools to provide the needed education. My source offered the following comment: "We [Vietnamese] know the importance of English so most parents will send their children to courses out[side] of [normal] schooling time. Most families in the towns do that. . . . Except for [people in rural areas]." (personal communication, 13 May 2017)

As for the number of hours of English instruction required in schools in the Philippines, the following data have been reported to me from sources in that country:

Table 7. Minimum hours of instruction in [LOCAL LANGUAGE(S)] and in English, as of early 2017, in the nation of the Philippines

Educational Level	LOCAL Language(s) Instruction		English Language Instruction	
	Hours/week	Hours/year	Hours/week	Hours/year
Grades 1-3	5	202	5	202
Grades 4-6	5	202	5	202
Grades 7-9	5	202	5	202
Compulsory Education Ends at Grade __12___, but education is free through Grade __12__				
Grades 10-12	5	202	5	202

Source: An anonymous contact teaching in the Philippine School Systems.[2]

In the above cases, the number of hours of English required in the primary and early secondary levels exceeded what was required in Thailand. However, the differences in amount of mandatory instruction is probably not enough to explain national differences in itself.[3]

POTENTIAL ADDITIONAL FACTORS

Some educational administrators in Thailand have suggested to this writer that the above suggestion (that, in practice, minimum number of mandated hours of instruction is not directly related to educational outcomes) might indeed be the case. Some of them also seemed to imply that lists of official hours of instruction may be less revealing than they might seem. For example, some Thai educational administrators noted that it could be hard for the supervising government agencies to know exactly how many hours were actually being devoted to English, and even harder to know how those hours were being used. Teachers at all levels were required to file lesson plans for their courses. However, as one administrator pointed out, it was becoming common for teachers to simply file the lesson plans that were provided by the publishers of their language textbooks. The supervisor was aware that these materials were often "adapted" to local users, but the type and extent of these adaptations was often not reported.

An additional issue, especially in primary schools, was that the teachers who had the responsibility of teaching English did not actually feel competent to do so. Just as in some Western countries, the training and certifications for teaching in primary schools were multidisciplinary ("primary education," for example), rather than encouraging disciplinary specializations. Furthermore, some elementary schools were so small that the full teaching load, for all subjects, might be borne by just two or three teachers. I was given the impression that English was the subject that weighed most heavily on these teachers' schedules; many primary school teachers would prefer to have this subject taught by specialists, and possibly even by native speakers, but the means had not been found to do this.

Even in secondary schools, where teacher preparation was more specialized, many teachers could still be tempted to use too much Thai (L1) in the English (L2) classroom. The teachers might indeed have training and competence in English, but because the area where I was studying was not frequented by foreign tourists, it was perceived to be an area where it was difficult to practice English.[4] These secondary school weaknesses were not true across the board. Some government secondary schools even hired native speakers of English from abroad. However, even the students of these teachers seemed not to be using English voluntarily outside the classroom.

Be that as it may, comparing Thailand's 2016 grid of instructional hours with Thailand's 1986 grid reveals that in the 30 years between these two data points, the number of hours devoted to English instruction had risen by 40 hours per year in the first three grades, had possibly DROPPED by 40 to 120 hours per year in grades 4 through 6 (assuming the 1986 figures were accurate), had perhaps DROPPED by 40 to 120 hours per year in grades 7 through 9, and had held approximately steady in grades 10 to 12. These were only "Basic" levels. However, the regulations also limited the number of hours that schools could devote to

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[2] Another source claims that in the Philippines half of the regular school subjects are taught in English. I am not yet in a position to judge which of the two claims about Philippine English instruction is more correct.

[3] Some of the informal oral communications received from various parties, along with material published in sources such as Bautista and Bolton, ed. (2008) *Philippine English*, suggests that in some of the cases I have just reported, the term "hours of English instruction" may have had a meaning different from the one I had intended. For example, in Thailand, with the exception of a few English-intensive or English-only programs, for most schools "hours of English instruction" refers to a set of classes in which instruction is *about* English and I which the English classes are often the *only* classes in which the students receive exposure to English usage. By contrast, I have been given the impression that in the Philippines, and also in some schools in Indonesia and perhaps Malaysia and Singapore, the term "hours of English instruction" would refer to classes on English grammar, usage, and literature, much as the term is used in the United States. *In addition,* in many schools in some of these countries, English is the *primary* language of instruction in some of the *regular* subjects as well. This comparative question requires further investigation.

[4] I do not necessarily agree with this explanation, which was widely mentioned by people who had grown up or who were teaching in the area. At this point I am merely reporting this as a widely cited local explanation. As with the "we were never colonized" explanation, I suggest that it should be taken as a "provisional hypothesis" that may be critiqued or tested in future work.

supplemental educational activities, such as "Learner Development Activities" (limited to 120 hours a year, or 3 hours per week, for the first 9 years, and then increased to 360 hours a year, or 9 hours per week) and "Additional courses/activities provided by schools, depending on their readiness and priorities" (not more than 40 hours a year, or 1 hour per week, for the first six years; not more than 200 hours a year, or 5 hours per week, for the next three years; and not LESS than 1,600 hours—possibly for the full three years [the chart's wording and context were ambiguous]—for the final three years).

Despite these seemingly rigid and limited provisions for English language instruction, some private schools were reportedly doing much more than this. At one private school in Bangkok where in the academic year 1987–1988 I had helped provide supplemental English language instruction to grades 5 through 9, the school appeared to be providing at least 5 hours of English instruction per week, well beyond the minimum standards listed by Smalley and by the Ministry of Education. In the highest of those grades the students were separated according to demonstrated ability in English, and according to my memory, some of the students in the most advanced of the 9th grade sections were quite fluent and also learned new vocabulary with little difficulty.

My general impression is that since the 1980s, the Thai population's general abilities in English have actually improved somewhat, despite the limited hours of instruction given in the elementary grades. It probably helps that English instruction now begins in Grade 1, even if the overall impact remains minimal. Perhaps consistent with the figures reported in Table 3 above, most Thai informants I have encountered since 2013 report that they have received twelve (12) years of English-language instruction, beginning in Grade 1 and continuing through Grade 12. In addition, the levels of compulsory education, which reportedly stopped at Grade 4 as recently as the 1970s, then rose to Grade 6 in the early 1980s and then to Grade 9 in the early 1990s, had reportedly reached Grade 12 by the 2010s or earlier, an expansion of educational opportunities that was made possible by a tremendous expansion in enrollments at the nation's many Teachers' Colleges, which were promoted to the level or Rajabhat Institutes in the 1990s and then to the level of Rajabhat Universities in the early 2000. And there have indeed been improvements in competency, even at what might be called the "street level" of English usage. During my first visit to Thailand in the early 1980s, it was very difficult to find anybody on the streets who could speak or hear numbers in English. By 2007, on my penultimate visit, even common vendors of seemingly low education would sometimes announce the amount of my change in English, at least in Bangkok. By 2013, when I was in southern Thailand, it was clear that this skill, and more, had extended at least to the youngest generations in the area.

Yet despite this, what I heard most often from my young Thai interlocutors (especially those of lower education, but sometimes also from university graduates) was a sense of frustration at their failure to acquire English competency despite 12 years or more of English instruction. This comment was most often made when comparing my Thai language skills to their English language skills. I am often told that I speak Thai like a native, and for me it is a skill acquired entirely at graduate school (Cornell University, in the United States) and then through years of in-country experience. The comment usually comes in the form of a question: "What do we need to do to be able to speak English as well as you speak Thai? We've studied English for twelve years, and we can't speak it at all. What is the secret to gaining fluency?" To some extent, that is a question to which I myself have been seeking answers over the past four years.

INDICATORS AND CAUSES OF WEAKNESS—A "VIEW FROM THE GROUND"
Before I go further, I should probably reveal my personal background as a way of explaining my personal perspectives on this topic.

My formal university training was first as a historian (B.A., Houghton College) and then as an anthropologist (M.A. and Ph.D., Cornell University), with special interests in religion, religious movements, and Southeast Asia, especially Thailand. My initial university teaching experiences in the United States were in anthropology and in Southeast Asian Studies. Over the years, I had accumulated some experience teaching English to Asian students, but teaching English had never been my primary occupation. Also, I had never been formally trained in standard foreign language teaching techniques, although in my capacity as chief editor for the Center for Southeast Asian Studies publishing program at Northern Illinois University, which published widely used textbooks in Vietnamese and Burmese and was considering potential textbook publications for other languages, I became fairly familiar with some of the contemporary trends and discussions on how to teach Southeast Asian languages and on language teaching more generally.

It was a surprise, therefore, to be informed within my first week in the PhD Program for Asian Studies at Walailak University that I would be expect to teach a series of "English for Asian Studies" courses that would equip the students for the level of English that they were already supposed to be using in their required graduate program courses but which they mostly lacked. Since I did not have prior formal training in ESL teaching techniques, and since my students were exhibiting some unique problems that I had not observed in other populations, I had to be creative in how I taught.

I also had to be observant, to try to see where the problems were. For the most part the underlying problems appeared to be the same as what I was hearing from young Thai adults who were not in our graduate programs. Issues that I observed included the following:

1. A conviction among the students that the chances of gaining English fluency ranged from unlikely to impossible, given the seeming ineffectiveness of the prior 12 years of instruction (potentially 14 years or more, for MA and PhD students). This record of seeming failure could in itself feel demoralizing.
2. A tendency to use a combination of "coping skills" that further contributed to the sense of personal frustration. For example I have long had the impression that English language instruction in Thailand had favored what might be called the "grammar plus translation" method of learning and using English. What I mean by this is that English grammar was taught as a set of rules, and the grammar rules were taught at such a level of density and precision that even native

speakers would often have difficulty understanding the rule being suggested and why and how it was applied. The overall effect of this approach was to turn English into a set of grammatical rules to be memorized, rather than a set of stylistic tools to be applied selectively as the communicational situation warranted.

3. Furthermore, it was common for Thailand's undergraduate and graduate students to approach their English-language reading and writing assignments b   y resorting to word-for-word translations from print and (more frequently) on-line dictionaries such as "Google Translate." The problem with this approach is that, particularly when the students were attempting to produce English-language writing or translations, they tended to plug the translated words—or entire paragraphs—into phrases that exhibited underlying Thai grammatical structures or a combination of Thai and English grammars, thereby suggesting that the years of grammatical instruction mentioned above had never been meaningfully integrated into actual English-language communicative tasks.

4. An additional problem was that many of the students lacked sufficient English-language skills to be able to use Thai-to-English dictionaries effectively. In the years 2013-2017, most students who used dictionaries in my classes used on-line dictionaries, even though the quality of on-line dictionaries was still not as good as the best print dictionaries (though by early 2017 Google Translate seemed to be catching up fast, it still was not nearly as good, extensive, or precise as, say, the *Thai-English Dictionary* co-authored by Damnoen and Sathianphong (2552 [2009]). Whether using print dictionaries or on-line ones, this approach seemed to require a high level of bilingual competency to be able use the dictionary results effectively. One of the reasons for this was because most dictionary entries included multiple translations for each term, while failing to provide the kinds of context or usage notes that would enable less-skilled users to make good choices. Furthermore, although Google Translate, in particular, was reported to be making moves —via "neural network" technology—in the direction of the kinds of phrase-by-phrase translations that might make more idiomatic translations possible, as of early 2017 that technology did not yet seem to be applied to Google Translate's Thai-to-English translations.

5. Consequently, whether as a result of the kinds of training received earlier, or perhaps in reaction to the drudgery of having gone through years of rote memorization of grammar rules that had no direct correspondences in Thai grammar, many students did "grammar translation" by putting translated English words in the middle of sentence structures that still revealed the underlying Thai grammar and syntax. Very few students seemed to have the skills needed to translate idiom-for-idiom, and those who did so effectively seemed to have studied abroad for at least a year or had otherwise had lasting and intensive contacts with non-Thai-speaking foreigners with whom the Thai students had been maintaining relationships through Facebook and other means.

Some publications by professional researchers and teachers of English instruction in Thailand suggest that the behaviors outlined above may indeed be rooted in the methods of instruction that most Thai students have faced in their pre-university English classes. Watson Todd (2005), for example, described the situation as follows:

> English teaching in Thailand has been dominated by the traditional "talk-and-chalk" approach where classrooms are teacher-oriented and explanation of English grammar given in Thai predominate . . . this traditional approach is still the most common. . . . (Watson Todd 2005:45, quoted in Darasawang, Reinders, and Waters 2015: page number not listed)

This approach contrasts markedly with the approaches used in second language learning in Western countries, where greater emphasis has long been placed on what might be called the "Communicative Approach" or the "Learner-Centered" approach. Drawing on a multi-national study of "national management cultures" conducted by Geert Hofstede (1991 [2010]) and his collaborators, [5] Pornapit, Reinders, and Waters (2007:n.p.) have suggested that the organizational national organizational traits suggested for Thailand by Hofstede

> can be seen as contributing to a view of education which values the authority of the teacher, discourages individualism in learners, emphasizes rules and facts as a way of reducing uncertainty, and inhibits behavior likely to lead to social conflict (Pornapit, Reinders, and Waters (2007:n.p,)

Pornapit, Reinders, and Waters, at least one of whom was teaching at one of Thailand's leading universities, went on to observe that the patterns and values noted in the two block quotations above "do not appear to have changed markedly over the years" (2007:n.p.), whereas educators in Western nations have moved toward

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[5] In anthropology, the idea of "national cultures" or "national personalities" has long been rejected by most contemporary scholars. It was most closely associated with the work in the 1930s and 1940s of noted American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, whose work included national personality studies of Thailand (1952 [1943]), Japan (1946), and other groups (also see Benedict 1934, which was one of the earliest fully-worked-out versions of her approach). Similar "culture and personality" approaches were used by cross-cultural psychologists up into the 1950s and 1960s. However, by the early 1960s, this notion of "culture" as expressing nation-wide or society-wide personality traits had been rejected by most mainstream anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists, among whom the approach would probably be dismissed today as a problematic example of the "essentializing" of "race," gender, and culture. In other words, such conceptions of shared culture assume much more cultural and psychological homogeneity within particular groups than actually exists (see, e.g., Chao, Chen, et al. 2007; Jaffe 2007; and Prentice and Miller 2006). However, the notion of nation-wide personalities and personality-type "cultures" survives in some forms of cross-cultural psychology, and the longevity of Hofstede's work suggests that the approach may also remain popular in cross-cultural studies of organizational management styles.

a learner-centred approach to education, which attempts to promote the pupil's development, as an individual with intellectual and emotional needs, and as a social being . . . enabling learners to learn how to learn by their own efforts. Teachers are not instructors but creators of an environment in which learners learn. . . .

Knowledge is [therefore] seen as a . . . creative problem-solving capacity that depends on an ability to retrieve appropriate schemata from a mental store, to utilize whatever can be automatically brought to bear upon a situation, and to bend existing conceptual structures to the creation of novel concepts that offer a working solution to the parpticuilar problem in hand. . . .

Learners [in this alternative approach] are seen as active participants, shaping their own learning, with the teacher cast in the role of guide or facilitator. Thus [the progressivist approach current in many Western schools lays] great stress on the need for learning by doing, rather than by being taught. (Clark 1987:____; quoted in Pornapit, Reinders, and Waters 2007: n.p.; also see Clark 2011)[6]

This description that Clark gives of "Western" approaches to education stands in sharp contrast to the habitual learning strategies that I noticed in my graduate students in Thailand, learning strategies that were manifest throughout the full body of their work, not just in my English for Asian Studies classes. The students, whose ages ranged from the mid-twenty to mid-fifty years old, seemed hesitant to suggest innovative projects, tended to wait passively for instructions from their advisors, seemed to hesitate to make new connections among ideas, and often found it easier to repeat existing data or anecdotes than to use those materials to synthesize new hypotheses. These characteristics were not exhibited by all students, nor were they necessarily permanent features of their work, nevertheless they were exhibited by the majority of the students in my classes, at least in their earliest terms of study.

I had long suspected that the difficulties and resistances that I was encountering in university undergraduate and graduate students were rooted in disappointing prior experiences in English instruction. A local primary-level educational administrator I interviewed in May 2017 voiced a parallel opinion. Having been given almost no prompting beyond my announcement that I was writing a paper on English instruction and English language abilities of school children and university students, this administrator observed that their abilities were probably very bad. She went on to suggest the following four reasons for their weakness in English, all of them starting as early as Grades 1 through 3:

1. Time — Too little time is devoted to English language instruction (see Table 3 above)
2. Methods — Some teachers teach in a way that สอนเครียด (*saaun khriat,* that is, "make the students nervous," or "make the students tense up"); moreover, even in the early elementary grades, some of these teachers สอนไม่สนุก (*saaun mai sanuk* — "teach in ways that are not 'fun'"); consequently, the students เบื่อ (*buea* —get "bored" or get "fed up" or frustrated and uninterested)
3. Curriculum — The main problem here, said the administrator, was that the mandated curriculum changes too frequently (เปลี่ยนบ่อย—*plian baaui*), so the teachers themselves เบื่อ (*buea*—get bored, weary, burned out, or fed up, thereby contributing to both students and teachers being undermotivated)
4. The Teachers — The administrator pointed out that there can be great variation among the teachers, with some of them more effective than others. However, the administrator noted that there are cases where the teachers themselves did not speak good English, or where the English teacher may have received primary training in an unrelated field such as Physical Education, or may simply have received general educational (ศึกษาศาสตร์— *sueksaasaat*(training at one of the Teachers' Colleges (now known as Rajabhat Universities) without specific training in how to teach a foreign language such as English. Again, the administrator stressed that there could be great variation among the teachers. However, the most serious failing she noted was that some of the teachers สอนน่าเบื่อ (*saaun naa buea*—teach in a boring way). The administrator noted that the teachers needed to "play games" (เล่นเกมส์—*len keem*) with the students, but some of the teachers were "lazy" or "old" and failed to do this.

An additional feature that we discussed was the seeming emphasis on English grammar. However, I had the impression that the administrator did not see this point as being as much of an issue as the above four issues, possibly because she herself viewed English as being a language requiring mastery of a great deal of detail, the same the average Thai person considers to be the case with Thai.[7] However, when we discussed grammar as being a potential obstacle, she also suggested that overemphasis on this

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[6] The two "Clark"'s in the parenthetical citation are probably not the same individuals. In the short time available for drafting this paper, I was not able to view the pages within Pornapit et al (2007) that would have allowed me to cite Clark 1988 directly, but the second source by Ian Clark (2011) seemed a substantively close parallel to the source they cited, and its content is similar to what I have read and heard elsewhere.

[7] My wording of this phrase is deliberate: many Thai people who have been formally trained in the Thai language, especially to university-level Thai language studies, assume the language to be extremely "intricate" and "difficult." However, in the opinion of this second-language learner of Thai, although the language is indeed "rich" in its vocabulary (especially its recent coinages from Sanskrit and Pali roots), and also somewhat detailed in its linguistic registers (intimate vs. colloquial vs. academic vs. literary vs. poetic vs. the language and style of official documents, etc.), it is probably no more intricate in this regard than English, and certainly less so than Javanese. However, for English-speaking learners of Thai, the most important issues is not "grammar," at least not in the sense that is used in regard to English (Thai has no verb conjugations, for example), but rather word choice and word order. The native Thai speaker's perception of their own language's "difficulty" is therefore probably a product of the ways that the Thai language is taught to Thai students, a set of instructional habits that may well be duplicated in the ways

point might contributed to students' aversion to English, particularly when, as in point 2 above, the teachers used grammar drills as a way to make their students เครียด (*khriat—*nervous, tense, and doubting their ability to learn).

If Clark and the other authors cited above were correct that the above weaknesses were wedded to a teacher-focused and hierarchical teaching style, then the two systems are likely mutually reinforcing. A teacher-focused style in the elementary and secondary grades (which indeed has been widely reported to me by Thai university and graduate students, some of whom claim that the style continues all the way up through university) could contribute to some of the teachers' tendency to exhibit some of the rigidly controlling behaviors that made learning less "fun" and the students more "nervous," purely as a way of managing the classroom in a way that gave the instructor a sense of emotional security. Meanwhile, teachers raised in that environment, and perhaps receiving teacher training in environments that exhibited the same features, might have few active models suggesting alternative ways of teaching. Finally, the tendency of Thai educational systems to issue detailed directives and objectives for all levels of education (the English-language version of the 2008 objectives statements for English/"Foreign Language" extends for a full 28 pages — Thailand Ministry of Education 2008:266–293), and to require voluminous documentation of all levels of activity, may further contribute to a desire among teachers to avoid risks and minimize creativity in their instructional activity.

As for the "learner-centred approach to education" mentioned above by Clark, in the mid-2010s, professors seeking to implement the approach in Thai higher education systems tended to refer to this approach as "Active Learning," a term that was strongly promoted by leading educational institutions in the country. In practice, though, Active Learning seemed to be more a "slogan" than an active strategy, partly because institutional limitations made it difficult to put the approach into practice. For example, in many tertiary institutions offering English classes, the class sizes were too large for the instruction to be anything other than teacher-centered. In one such institution, general education courses in English for first-year students were offered by dividing the students into two large two-hour weekly "lecture" sections of more than a thousand students each (and reportedly with no teaching assistants to help supplement or explain the lecture in small groups), supplemented by two-hour break-out sections of 50 to 100 students each in which individual section leaders were left to their own devices in determining the instructional methods and materials to be used. In such contexts, the implementation of truly "student-centered" learning techniques seemed nearly impossible, and the educational results were reportedly also negligible. According to some reports, this context of instruction in large classes may have also contributed to the students' perception that English mastery was unimportant, even for students preparing for professions, such as medicine, where eventual contact with English-speaking foreigners was very likely (personal information, names withheld, 2015 and 2016).

A general lack of motivation to learn and use English was observable throughout the higher education institution I am describing. Even professors and administrators who knew some English tended not to use it, and most students seemed even more reluctant to do so. By late 2016, the university had begun to implement minimum test standards for new employees, but even then the standards were fairly low and there were few practical reasons to use it in daily life. Almost every student and professor was Thai, and in such a setting there was no more reason or motivation to use English in daily conversation than an American student or professor would feel to use French or Chinese on a daily basis at an American university.[8]

I should add that the generally observed weakness in improving English did not extend to all foreign languages. For example, this same university had seemingly strong foreign language programs in Chinese and Indonesian, and I had the impression that students taking these language may have been advantaged by NOT having been exposed to instruction in these languages prior to university. Chinese majors reportedly struggled somewhat due to the intensity of the instructional program and the intricacies of the writing system, yet the program's third year included six months of study in China, and those students who actually went there reportedly did well. As for Indonesian, the language seemed particularly easy to acquire. As with Chinese, students of Indonesian spent six months in Indonesian universities, and many of them reportedly came back fluent. I even know a Thai graduate student who did a mere three months of fieldwork in Indonesia without any formal language instruction, and at the end of these three months he was able to converse in Indonesian with Indonesian students who attended his university in Thailand. All of that said, it should be observed that for both of these languages (Indonesian and Chinese) the classes were smaller, and the instruction was optional (whereas the English classes were mandatory), and as a result the language learners were more likely to be highly motivated and self-actuating. The classes were also often small enough for "active learning" techniques to be used and for teacher-student relationships to be cultivated outside the classroom.

IMPROVING MOTIVATIONS TO LEARN

This consideration of motivations to learn brings me back to some of my opening observations. As observed in this article's opening paragraphs, many have suggested that Thai citizens' relatively poor performance on objective measures of English language competency may have been due to the country's status of never having been colonized by an English-speaking country such as Britain or the United States of America. One of the problems with this notion was that Southeast Asian countries that had never been colonized by English-speaking powers—Vietnam and Indonesia, for example—were reportedly performing better

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that these same schools teach English to their students. Though this suggestion is at the moment merely a hunch, it may bear exploration in future papers. In any event, as noted in the text, the administrator herself suggested that the widespread local perception that English is "difficult" may be due to this very same overemphasis on "grammar," as locally defined.

[8] As one relatively competent English speaker (TOEIC score of 600) put it in early June 2017, when she is around other Thai speakers in situations where there are no non-speakers present, "it is easier to speak Thai," and for that reason her English competency was rapidly regressing in the nearly exclusively Thai-language university where she now worked.

than Thailand, despite Thailand's earlier status as a self-subordinating "semi-colony" of Britain and the United States. However, another problem with this argument is its assumption of a direct line of effect between colonial influence and present-day performance some 70 years (almost three generations) after the achievement of independence. I would like to suggest that this assumption is flawed, and I would like to use Malaysia as an example illustrating this flaw.

My first visit to Malaysia was in late 1984. I was accompanying a group of nearly 50 Thai citizens, mostly of Chinese descent, who were going to a conference in the national capital of Kuala Lumpur. The people organizing the trip housed us at an Assemblies of God seminary in Petaling Jaya, which at the time appeared to be one of Kuala Lumpur's more affluent suburbs. At the time, I shared the assumption that Malaysia's prior status as a British colony would mean that English was widely used. Consequently, I assumed I would have a much easier time communicating with local people than my Sino-Thai companions. I turned out to be mistaken. English was hardly spoken at all, and it was my Sino-Thai companions who found it easier to communicate, using various Chinese languages to communicate with local vendors.

In later visits to Malaysia in the late 1980s I found that there were indeed pockets of society where English was spoken. One of these was a multi-ethnic church on Penang Island to which I was referred on my periodic visits to renew my visa for Thailand. In this church the predominant ethnic groups were Chinese and South Asian, many members of the church were highly educated, and English was the primary language used in the church services. However, once I stepped outside of that environment, I mostly found myself unable to communicate. On a subsequent visit to that island in 2000, I still found English to be of questionable value for communication, even in tourism-oriented areas, although the situation had somewhat improved.

Fast forward to late 2016. I was deplaning at the airport in Kuala Lumpur to attend an academic conference near that city. On the way off the plane I found it very easy to identify individuals who could speak English and provide me advice. This continued to be the case through the airport, in my travels through the capital, and on through to the outlying areas where the conference was being held. Clearly, not everybody could speak English with me. But there were enough English speakers around that even those who could not speak English could usually point out somebody in the vicinity who could talk with me easily and clearly, a situation that would probably be unusual even in the most tourist-oriented areas of Thailand.[9]

What had happened? Was this English fluency the lingering result of Malaysia's colonial experience? Probably not. As I had observed in 1984, if the colonial experience had ever given Malaysia a competitive advantage in English (and it should be observed that some parts of Malaysia were under British rule for only 50 years, which is less time than the country has been independent), then that advantage seemed to have disappeared by 1984. Whatever measures had enabled Malaysia to achieve more widespread use of English by late 2016 were probably measures that had been put into place well after the country's independence from Britain.[10]

Yet when I tried in late 2016 to find out what Malaysia's education system was doing that made its English instruction more effective than Thailand's, I received information from local educators that suggested that Malaysia was providing its primary and secondary students even LESS instruction in English than Thailand was providing. Indeed, many who responded—both university students and university professors—suggested that they thought that Malaysia's language education system had many improvements to make before the country's language education systems would be adequate.

TOWARD SOLUTIONS
A few days after returning to Thailand I encountered a newspaper story (I no longer remember the source) that reported research suggesting that one of the keys to relative fluency in places like Singapore (and by extension to places like Kuala Lumpur) was the presence of a key mass of people who already had achieved sufficient fluency in English that they were using it on the streets not only in conversations with foreigners but in conversations with their compatriots. This would be consistent with the observation that institutions like the National University of Singapore, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (also in Singapore), and the Asia Research Institute (also in Singapore) all seemed to operate almost exclusively in English. Similarly, at two universities I visited in Malaysia in late 2016, all the instruction and most conversations were in English, though students could sometimes be heard conversing among themselves in Malay or Chinese. By contrast, as of mid-2017, I cannot think of a single university in Thailand where this would be the case, with the possible exception of the "International Schools" attached to some universities such as Thammasat University (Bangkok), Payap University (Chiang Mai), and Mahidol University (Bangkok), and even in these schools the students speaking English appeared to be mostly foreigners, not Thai.

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[9] I should admit that this might be an unfair comparison. Because normally I speak Thai fairly comfortably, when I see an Asian face in Thailand I normally lead with Thai, and for that reason I am probably not hearing most people's true English-language capabilities. In Malaysia, by contrast, I tended to lead with English, since I did not speak Malay or Chinese, and that may have caused my interlocutors to use more English with me than would have been the case among Thai speakers who encountered me in Thailand. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the Kuala Lumpur area in late 2016 I did not observe the same kind of fear of speaking English to white foreigners that I saw in most Thai young people of the same age at the time.
[10] I should also note that Kuala Lumpur was probably one of Malaysia's more cosmopolitan areas, and that English usages might be less common in some of the outlying states. However, since Kuala Lumpur was the area I was visiting in 1984, I think it is valid to use this locale for comparing chronological changes in competency between 1984 and 2016.

The question is what enabled Singapore, and apparently also some parts of Malaysia, to make the shift from exclusive use of local languages to effective use of English as a business and educational overlay. What enabled these places to achieve "critical mass"? At one of the Malaysian universities I was visiting in late 2016 I asked this question directly to some of the university's professors and academic administrators. They indicated that the change to English had been fairly recent, and that it was also the result of a conscious change from the top. The university administrators begin modeling the use of English by using it in their own planning meetings, while also mandating its use throughout the university; gradually it trickled down. I suspect that in this case the effort may also have been aided by the multicultural nature of the faculty and the student body, in a country where at least three different languages, from three different language families, are used in peoples' homes. The increased use of English in Malaysia relative to Thailand also may have been aided by the two largest ethnic groups' reluctance to use each other's languages as a shared *lingua franca.* It has been reported that in multi-ethnic Singapore, the decision to promote English as a unifying inter-ethnic lingua franca was proposed as early as 1956 (Silver 2002:105). A recent survey conducted by Chelsey Hice (2016:17)) among university students in Singapore and Thialand suggests that by around the year 2015, English was much more widely used in the daily life of Singaporean university students than it was being used in the life of Thai students, a pattern of difference that could be self-reinforcing over time.[11]

In Thailand, where much of the country is more ethnically and linguistically homogeneous, at least as far as recognizing so-called "Standard Thai" as the primary language of business and education throughout the country, attempts to move a university to English as a primary medium of instruction and administration would probably meet more resistance. I have in fact observed a university in Thailand that was attempting to do this as early as the mid-1980s. The university tried to require both faculty and students to speak only English when on campus, and I heard frequent announcements to this effect over the campus loudspeakers. Yet throughout my time on that campus, at least 90 to 95 percent of what I heard spoken was Thai, not English, and the students I met on that Bangkok campus seemed just as nervous about using English as the university students I would meet in southern Thailand some 30 years later.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROVED MOTIVATION TO LEARN AND USE ENGLISH
Yet all is not bad news. Even in the relatively non-tourist parts of Thailand where I live and work, and where there therefore assumed to be so few opportunities to practice English, I have encountered examples of students who have learned to excel at the language, sometimes rapidly. There are local high school and university students who improve their English to a point where they can study overseas comfortably. Some local students have learned to use on-line resources to improve their exposure to English. With proper guidance, even students from this local area can sometimes compete well alongside students from more affluent regions. A university English debate team from our local area reportedly won a national English debate title. A senior administrator at this same university who had grown up in the province where it is located recently related to me the story of how he had taught himself conversational English more than thirty years earlier by going to a railroad junction near his home and making himself talk with the passengers (this was before the advent of budget airlines, when rail travel was still relatively appealing to international tourists). Another person—one of the few First-Year students at my university ever to approach me to converse in English—told of "being afraid" of foreigners (despite living in a relatively "tourist-heavy" location) until one day when he met an Australian tourist who was lost, and after a day of guiding the tourist around his town, his fear had gone. Yet another southerner, a Thai woman who now uses English to teach high school classes in an intensive English program, told me of keeping her English skills up through conversations with an extensive international network of Facebook friends and Skype-style conversations.

However, most Thai university students and faculty members I met were not doing any of these things. The question is: What can produce better motivation and better English learning outcomes for these students? This article's focus primarily on primary and secondary education is deliberate, for both the author and many of his Thai interlocutors seem to believe that corrective action needs to start at this level. Nevertheless, as just noted, some individuals can overcome these shortcomings on their own. And even for those university and post-graduate students who need pedagogical guidance, there are a few things that can at least marginally improve the outcomes. I suggest that these interventions can be grouped into at least three sets: Institutional factors, personal factors, and "engagement" factors.

1. Institutional factors – Though it is common in education to focus on the activities of individual teachers and classrooms, I would like to suggest that the most important factor is often the institutional environment. There are many ways—both direct and indirect—that a institution can signal its support, ambivalence, or lack of enthusiasm for second-language acquisition, including English competency. Schools and universities with overly large English classes, underpaid English teachers, and a lack of social spaces where use of English is unavoidable can expect to perform less well than those who have smaller English classes, who actively support their English instructors' efforts, and who actively work to create unavoidably English-only spaces within their institutions through such practices as pairing local students with English speakers from abroad who lack local language skills.

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[11] Specifically, out of 57 Singaporean university students surveyed, around 48 said they "always" used English in school (the other 9 said they used it "frequently" in school), around 40 said that they used English "always" or "frequently" at home, and around 55 said that they used English "always" or "frequently" with friends. In Thailand, by contrast, out of 68 university students surveyed only around 24 said that they used English "always" or "frequently" in school, only about 5 said they did so at home, and only about 19 said they did so among friends. The reaming students said that they used English only "sometimes" or "never," with 33 of the Thai students saying they "never" used English at home. I strongly suspect that Hice's Thailand sample was urban based, as in the area where I live and teach the "never" scores would probably have been even higher.

As for the English teachers' qualifications and comfort levels in the classroom, especially at primary and secondary levels, one potential means of improvement might be to adapt the model that many school districts in the United States use to provide Special Education services. In the United States, it is rare, for example, that any one school has enough blind students to justify keeping on staff, on a permanent basis, a teacher who is trained and experienced in teaching blind students, and the local schools are even less well equipped to supervise those teachers in the teachers' specialty, because nobody in the school administration is likely to possess the requisite specialized background. Consequently, these specialists are often provided through "Regional Special Education Cooperatives" who provide specialized braille and low-vision instructors where they are needed while also providing on-going training that keeps the special educators' skills up-to-date. A model like this one may be useful for improving the quality and effectiveness English teaching in rural and semi-rural Thailand, especially at the elementary level where weekly teaching hours are few and the school sizes often small.

Meanwhile, at the university level—and possibly at some secondary schools—it might be possible for senior administers and professors to model more widespread use of English by using the language in their organizational meetings, issuing meeting agendas and minutes in English, and being more diligent about providing essential documents in English and maintaining up-to-date English versions of official websites. In many cases this would probably entail a gradual process, as the numbers of staff members who feel competent to write in English are sometimes very small. Nevertheless, an institution truly determined to give English a greater role in its administration and instruction could probably being by contracting specialists to provide the first drafts of these materials and while gradually hiring people who have greater capabilities in English. The most important of these tasks, however, is for the administrators themselves to model the use of English, because if they fail to do so, their subordinates will probably assume that the administrators are not serious about English and will follow the administrators' example (not using English) instead of trying to act creatively on their own to promote English usage in their unit and among their students.

Another tool that some universities have tried is to impose minimum English test scores for admission or for graduation. In the long term, this should be effective in raising students' English competence levels. However, such measures need to be phased in with care. For example, if a university suddenly imposes high entrance test scores in a region where most students and potential employees have so far not been accustomed to taking the tests at all (sometimes citing cost of testing, sometimes citing fear of "failing," and almost always claiming to be unaware of the need for testing), it may not be enough to suddenly impose new testing standards, especially in those cases where standardized English testing centers are not even available in the local area. In such cases, the university seeking to raise English competencies of incoming students may need to reach out to surrounding high schools to provide free (or at least inexpensive) testing services, provide supplemental pre-enrollment English instruction, and perhaps even coordinate with local elementary and high school districts to help increase the competency and confidence of local English teachers. (Such activities could also increase the university's visibility and reputation among local schools, though this is not for certain.)

Some Thai educators have suggested to me that additional institutional problems may be happening at the national level. For example, at the same time as the Thai government mandates expanding numbers of hours in instruction in English, many of its leaders continue to express a type of hyper-nationalist discourse that prefers Thai language and "Thai identity" (as defined by the nation's socio-political elites) as superior to all other languages and cultural influences, at least for those who consider themselves "Thai." Many Thai students and adults also fail to see the potential usefulness of foreign languages for their future employment, and the nation's governmental institutions may not yet be doing enough to convince them otherwise or to model competency.

2. Personal factors—One of the benefits of smaller English language classrooms would be the potential for establishing closer relationships between teachers and the students. Just as is reported to be the case in psychological therapeutic relationships, trust and open teacher-student relationships can be an important enabler of student progress. This can be especially the case in societies like Thailand, where employees and students are reported to be relatively likely to share their personal problems with students and work superiors rather than going to third parties (Bennett 2016). This observation holds only for those cases where the problem to be discussed does not involve the superior (in such situations, avoidance behaviors and third-party rumors can be more common coping tools). However, creating the sense that students are appreciated and that the teacher can be approachable is very important even in this relatively hierarchical society.

3. "Engagement factors"—However, it is not enough to have good personal ties with the students. The instruction must also be engaging. This would be true anywhere, and it is especially true in Thailand, where "fun" (interpersonal engagement) is often a practical prerequisite for effective teamwork and learning. Often this "fun" is expressed in the form of games that promote group bonding as part of the context that makes work at learning possible. This expectation can be expressed at many different levels, well into adulthood. This point was first driven home to me many years ago, after I, as a visiting foreigner, had suffered through a seemingly endless round of games that served as a prelude to a late-night planning meeting that I had hoped would be brief. One of the leaders noticed my body language, and the next day he took me aside to explain that Thai and white foreigners tend to take opposite approaches to the relationship of "work" and "play." Foreigners (*farang*), he said, tend to work first, and play later. Thais, by contrast, play together first, and that *enables* them to work together.

These expectations that learning should be fun are not unique to Thailand, however. Blogs aimed at university-level educators in the United States also talk about the need for engaging students. Part of the methods advocated in the United States have to do with focusing on skills acquisition, communicating the practical purpose of what is being taught, and encouraging student-centered engagement. Many instructors in Thailand suggest employing some of the same techniques, frequently making reference, for example, to "People-Based Learning" (PBL), "student-based learning," "active learning," and "task-based learning" in formal conferences about English instruction and about university education in general (see, for example, Pornapit and Reinders 2015), including methods meant to increase students' willingness to take risks in their academic work (Pannathon and Lian 2015), implementing the use of play-based language learning, at least for children (Rin et al. 2015), and the incorporation of real-world tasks in university-level English classes (Wareesiri and Kitcha 2015). However, informal interaction with students and teachers alike suggest that greater amounts of interactively engaging activities would be desired, and perhaps even effective, if the often-large class sizes could be made small enough to encourage more interaction.

Still, even at the early primary level, some teachers in seemingly large class settings have been able to engage their students simply by singing songs that incorporate actions, and without requiring much memorization or "deep thinking" apart from singing along with the songs themselves. The effects of such techniques in reducing the "fear of speaking English with foreigners" can sometimes be remarkable. Not too long ago I observed English classes in a primary school where visiting teacher (a foreigner who spoke only English and Afrikaans) had been using songs with motions to engage the students. Not only did his supervisors speak highly of him, but I noticed this was one of the few places where the children showed almost no fear of approaching me, a white foreigner, and using vocabularies that, while simple, went well beyond a mere "Hello." Unfortunately, by the time they reach their early twenties, many of these same students, from the same schools, might be observed trying to run out the back door of their shops as soon as they see a white person approach the front counter, for fear that their inadequacies in English might be exposed.[12] The question is: Why?

The above are only a few of the factors that have been suggested by Thai and foreign interlocutors. Future research could pursue further investigation of instructional methods used in teaching English in Thailand and elsewhere, compare national frameworks for teaching English in Thailand and neighboring countries, and more.

FINAL SUGGESTIONS

In the Spirit of "Practicing" or "Engaged" Anthropology, I would like to offer the following final suggestions for improving English-language instructional outcomes in outlying areas like the one I have been examining in this study:

1. Look to local-level initiatives rather than national-level systemic reforms, then look for ways to identify the local successes, properly reward their creators, and then duplicate and disseminate the methods through other parts of the educational system.
2. Find ways to place capable English-language specialists all the way down to the primary level, perhaps by arranging to have two or three nearby schools share the same specialists.
3. In the days of YouTube and on-line social media, there is no longer a reason for average school children to feel isolated from actual opportunities for learning and practicing English outside the classroom. Indeed, at one university I know, in the year 2017 several senior English majors conducted individual research projects exploring the potential benefits of intensive engagement with TED Talk videos, YouTube videos, English-language films with and without English and/or Thai subtitles (this particular student watched twenty-seven different films all three ways in just ten weeks), and written forms of social media. The intensity of engagement that some of these students showed, and the benefits that they claimed from their personal engagements with these media, suggest the potentials for significant English skills improvements even in seemingly isolated areas like Thailand's Upper South.

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[12] Intriguingly, I noticed this behavior almost exclusively in young women who seemed to be in their upper teens and younger twenties, working in shops where somebody older might be expected to go to the counter in their place. The older women were usually much better at hiding their nervousness, and expressed it only when they realized that the customer could speak Thai. The main exception to this rule was, of all things, a hospital in a relatively rural location, where on one occasion a series of roughly half a dozen staff members turned their shoulders as if to flee even though I was accompanied by a local Thai person who had dark skin and spoke the local dialect. In this case there was a similar pattern – a turn to flee, followed by a turn back to face my friend once they heard the local dialect. Again, almost all of these individuals were female. Later on, once my face became better known at this hospital (hospitals in Thailand are used much the way that doctor's offices are used in the United States, with no prior appointments needed, even when not using the emergency room), the avoidance behavior disappeared. Nevertheless, this behavior, along with its potential gender and age marking, might be worth exploring in future papers, as it can still be observed in other contexts in some relatively rural locations.

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Edwin R. Zehner
PhD Program in Asian Studies
School of Liberal Arts, Walailak University
222 Thaiburi, Tha Sala, Nakhon Si Thammarat 80161 THAILAND
Email: ezehner1@gmail.com