

Teaching Using English

Dr. Andrew Davison

Dept. of Computer Engineering

Prince of Songkla University

Hat Yai, Songkhla 90112

E-mail: dandrew@ratree.psu.ac.th

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In this short article, I'll present my views on teaching *using* English. Teaching using English should be distinguished from the teaching *of* English, where the improvement of a student's English skills is the principal aim.

One source of confusion when we discuss this topic is that "teaching using English" can mean different things. I'll talk about three different teaching styles: using English-language course materials, using a Farang teacher, and using a English-speaking Thai teacher.

Before we begin, a little about my background: I have been an Ajarn in Thailand for about 6 years, teaching mostly at Prince of Songkla University, but also at AIT and Rangsit University in Bangkok. All my teaching has been in English, and so I have a lot of "hands-on" experience of the second teaching approach (being a Farang teacher).

The main trigger for writing this piece was the presentation by PSU's Vice-President Dr. Boonsom called (in English) "Making PSU Graduates Good in English", which he first presented to Heads of Departments in early November.

1. Using English-language Course Materials

With the growth of the Internet and Web, many teachers in Western universities are placing their lecturing materials online. Similarly, most new textbooks (especially in my area of Computer Engineering/Science) come with PowerPoint slides. The advantages are: ready-to-use high quality material, with links to textbooks and other resources. It is hardly a surprise that many Ajarn use these materials.

However, there are some problems, especially when we consider our students. The slides are often written in a very abbreviated form, which assumes that students will refer to the textbook for full details, the style of writing is very technical (e.g. a slide of equations with no explanation), and assumes a high proficiency in English.

For this kind of course material to be beneficial to our students, it must be supplemented by extra examples, simpler explanations of key concepts, and we should not assume that (average) students will do any extra reading.

Another scenario is to use this quality material, but translated into Thai. For instance, our department uses the Thai version of the standard text on computer networking protocols. A drawback is the lost opportunity to read English in the context of a student's area of study.

2. Using Farang Teachers

A course taught by a Farang is one where every aspect of the course uses English: this includes the lecture materials, exercises, exams, and the language used by the teacher. Most Farang teachers have poor Thai language skills, and so this approach also means that the Thai students must communicate with the teacher in English, whether verbally or by e-mail.

A Farang teacher should be employed first and foremost for their technical knowledge and teaching abilities, but some emphasis should be placed on their ability to speak (some) Thai, and to empathise with Thai culture. Farang deficit in language skills should be asked to attend language classes.

Perhaps the most important benefit of employing a Farang is their non-Thai background and perceptions: a Farang shows students different ways of viewing problems and solutions.

It is hard to be precise about these “*different ways of seeing*”, since they vary from one Farang to another. In my own case, my teaching style at PSU is heavily influenced by my 5 years of teaching at the University of Melbourne, and by being a teaching assistant in England and the USA. For instance, I believe in teaching through examples, and that theory must be motivated in ways the student can understand. My research interests, and my research style, also affect my teaching, both in the choice of topics and how I describe those topics.

I am **not** saying that my background is better than that of a Thai Ajarn’s, only that it is different, and that a student should be exposed to a wide range of academic viewpoints. This is probably what some people mean by making a university programme more international.

Paradoxically, the Farang’s different academic approach (which I am claiming as a benefit) is related to the problem of culture shock: a Farang may find it hard to comprehend the Thai style of living and working.

A frequently used argument against the employment of Farang as teachers is the so-called *language barrier*. The primary aim of teaching is to increase the knowledge of the student about the subject, but the use of English makes this harder since communication is more difficult.

My response is based on my experience of teaching in Thailand for the last 6 years: students who get good grades in other subjects do well in my courses, and the bad students do badly. In other words, student results are similar whether taught by a Farang or Thai. Also, over the years, many top students have said how much they enjoyed and benefited from my teaching. I can only suggest anecdotal reasons for why things are this way. I know of no empirical studies of the effectiveness of Farang teachers, and a scientific examination of the issues would definitely be very helpful.

My courses are centred around my PowerPoint slides, which deliberately use simple language, point form (rather than long sentences or paragraphs), plenty of examples and diagrams. I am helped by the computer engineering area which lends itself to practical demonstration. In class, I talk at about half my natural speaking speed, use simple language, and repeat complex ideas at least twice. All crucial concepts are explained in the slides so that a student who cannot understand my speech can read the material instead.

Students have also developed useful learning techniques, most notably *group working*. For instance, a group of friends nominate one of themselves to be the spokesman/translator for the group, and he solely interacts with me. This also seems to be the case with exercises and assignments written in English, where the same misunderstanding of a sentence may appear in many student solutions. Obviously, group working sometimes steps over into copying, but its value is that weaker students can turn to their peers for help.

It is interesting that the most difficult teaching techniques to use in the Thai system are those where the individual must perform alone and in front of others. For example, it is virtually impossible to start a classroom discussion. Part of the trouble is cultural, which makes it hard even for Thai Ajarn to get students involved, but the ‘terror’ felt by a student speaking in English in front of his peers makes things much worse.

Another advantage of a Farang teacher is that *English is used in context*. The student is mastering English which is directly relevant to their future working career. By contrast, many students do not see the importance of English language courses where they learn general skills which might or might not be useful in 4 or more years time.

The employment of Farang teachers in programmes may make *financial sense*, since they are effectively carrying out two tasks: the teaching of the subject, and the teaching of English skills. Furthermore, the presence of Farang in a programme seems to increase its appeal to students, especially the more able ones.

3. Using English-speaking Thai Ajarn

We should start by specifying exactly what “English-speaking” means in a classroom setting. Some people believe it implies that Thai Ajarn should speak solely in English. I suspect that such an approach is impossible to carry out in practice: the temptation to switch to a more familiar mode of communication (i.e. Thai) will be overwhelming.

A more realistic definition of “English-speaking” is where the Thai Ajarn communicates mostly in Thai (say for 80-90% of the time), with English confined to technical terms. Lecturing materials may be in English, but should be supplemented in the ways discussed in section 1.

This approach lacks the large exposure to English gained with a Farang teacher, but students are still presented with the English technical language that they’ll encounter at work. Also, the use of Thai allows the teacher to convey more subtle and complex ideas in a verbal way. The teacher will be able to draw on local knowledge and cultural elements (e.g. historical references) to enliven the communication.

For a better analysis of this teaching style, Thai Ajarn who have actually taught in English for a long period of time should be asked for their opinions.