

Comparative Observations of the EFL Contexts in Thailand and Japan

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1. Introduction

As the world becomes smaller and with increasing pressure on countries to ‘globalize’ in order to be successful and competitive, more and more nations have come to accept English as the *lingua franca* of international business. This is particularly true of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as Japan, who both endeavor to be economic powers in the world today.

Both Thailand (which just recently officially joined ASEAN in 2015), as well as Japan, have long histories with English education, and both have implemented major educational reforms aimed at developing students’ communicative English abilities. However, both countries also seem to be struggling in their endeavors, as they both consistently rank very low on internationally-administered TOEFL (see Table 1) and TOEIC (see Table 2) tests, and actually share average test scores very close to each other.

Table 1: TOEFL iBT Raking and Average Scores (Asia Region Rankings)
 (adopted from ETS, 2015b; ETS, 2014a; Yoshida, 2013)

Country	Ranking and Average Score	2014 (of 30 countries)	2013 (of 31 countries)	2012 (of 30 countries)
Thailand	Ranking	# 22 of 30	# 23 of 31	# 23 of 30
	Average score	74	76	76
Japan	Ranking	# 27 of 30	# 26 of 31	# 27 of 30
	Average Score	70	70	70

Table 2: TOEIC Raking and Average Scores (Worldwide Rankings)
 (adopted from ETS, 2015a; ETS 2014b; ETS, 2013)

Country	Ranking and Average Score	2014 (of 44 countries)	2013 (of 48 countries)	2012 (of 45 countries)
Thailand	Ranking	# 37 of 44	# 41 of 48	# 40 of 45
	Average score	481	493	499
Japan	Ranking	#35 of 44	# 40 of 48	# 39 of 45
	Average Score	512	512	512

The similarity of both nations in ministry-stated educational EFL goals contrasted with nearly uniform results on these standardized English proficiency examinations over recent years serves as an impetus for the author to more closely compare each nation's EFL background and context in order to consider if there may be deeper-rooted reasons behind the similarities.

This exploratory report will briefly summarize the cultural contexts and the ministry-mandated EFL-related reforms and teaching goals of both Thailand and Japan. It will also discuss multiple issues within the current TEFL context in each country that have been identified by researchers: concerns with pedagogy, teacher abilities and training, as well as learner motivation and goals.

2. The EFL Contexts of Thailand and Japan

2.1 Cultural Context

Thailand's population is about 67.7 million, and it is reported to be 75 percent ethnic Thai, 14 percent Chinese, with the remaining 11 percent consisting of peoples with roots from Malaysia, Laos, Burma, Cambodia, and India (Demographics of Thailand, 2015). Despite backgrounds of cultural diversity, government efforts have worked towards establishing national and cultural unity throughout the country (Jory, 2000). Thai is the singular official language.

Comparatively, Japan's population is nearly double that of Thailand at around 127 million, and is reported to be 98.5 percent ethnic Japanese. Japanese is the only national language (Demography of Japan, 2015).

Both Thailand and Japan pride themselves on being two of the few Asian nations that have never been colonized by another, Western or otherwise. Perhaps related to this fact is that apart from tourist hotspots, most citizens of either country have very little exposure to, or communicative need of, English in everyday life outside of the EFL classroom. Additionally, as will be commented on in this paper, the cultural contexts and high degree of cultural homogeneity (perceived or actual) of each country may also lend to certain barriers in communicative EFL education.

2.2 The Official Line: EFL Education Context and Goals

Thailand

In Thailand, where English has been a part of the curriculum since 1891, the national Ministry of Education (MOE) sets EFL policy at the elementary and secondary school levels. Sermsongsward and Tantipongsanuruk illustrate how EFL has evolved over the decades, focusing on pronunciation and grammar-translation in the 1930's, soon afterwards replaced by the aural-oral method, and focusing on communication skills as early as the 1960's (2015: 47). In 2002, official focus on EFL changed to English for communication purposes rather than academic study, and most recently, in 2008, English was set to be taught using a

communicative approach, and be promoted as the medium of instruction in others subjects (Sermsongsward and Tantipongsanuruk, 2015: 47). EFL studies entered the elementary school curriculum at grade four in the 1960's, and expanded to start in grade one from 1996.

In 1999, the MOE enacted the National Education Act which emphasized communicative language teaching, prescribing more meaningful use of English in local contexts immediately relevant to the learners, as well as more learner autonomy in project-based lessons (Darasawang, 2007: 191).

Thailand's schools have a 6-3-3 education system with foreign language lessons at every level. Although multiple optional foreign languages are taught, English has been deemed as the 'first foreign language' by the MOE and is mandatory for all 12 years of schooling, with secondary students taking 4-5 class hours per week, and elementary students taking 3-4 class hours per week (Punthumasen, 2007: 5-6). At the university level, undergraduate students must take 4 English courses, with about 3-4 class hours per week aimed towards communicative skills in speaking and writing (Darasawang, 2007: 192-193).

To support Thai students' development of English, from 1995 the government established 'English Program' (EP) schools throughout the country which feature some core classes taught in English and employ native English speakers. There were 183 EP schools as of 2007 (Punthumasen, 2007: 7). As a separate program, since 2012 the British Council has cooperated with the Thai MOE in establishing the Thailand English Teaching (TET) Program, which employs UK university students for short-term placements as assistant English language teachers at Thai schools.

Japan

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has set the criteria for foreign language leaning in Japan since 1947. Tahira highlights landmarks in MEXT's EFL endeavors, starting with a system similar to the Audiolingual method in the 1950's, shifting focus to grammar-translation in the 1960's, and eventually working towards emphasizing communicative ability in the 1970's and 1980's (2012). In 1989, MEXT for the first time set students' communicative abilities as the central goal of English education (Tahira, 2012). Although English has long been taught at Japanese junior high schools, high schools, and universities, only since 2011 has English education been officially taught at the elementary school level, and at the present time, only in the fifth and sixth grades.

In 2014, MEXT announced its most recent EFL reform plans with official goals to:

- (1) "Nurture the foundations for communication skills" at the elementary school level.
- (2) "Carry out simple information exchanges and describe familiar matters in English" at the lower secondary level.
- (3) "Nurture the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons" at the upper secondary school level.

(MEXT, 2014)

In Japan, the typical 6-3-3 education system is predominant, where students have 8 or more years of EFL study supposedly focused on communication skills. Classroom hours devoted to English study vary per grade level, and from high school and beyond, depend on individual student's own course of study. Fifth and sixth grade elementary students study about 1 class hour per week, junior high students roughly 2-3 class hours per week, while high school students study, depending on their course of study, anywhere from 1-7 class hours per week. EFL class hours for Japanese university students also vary greatly per each student's chosen course of study, but most students will have at least one additional year with 1-2 weekly class hours of foreign language study.

To support Japan's efforts in developing students' communicative abilities, the government established the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program in 1987. Young native speakers from English-speaking countries who join the program are sent to primary and secondary school levels as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in English classrooms. There are currently around 4,500 JET program ALTs in schools throughout Japan, as well as a number of ALTs from private dispatch companies.

3. Issues: Inconsistency between Policy and Practice

Despite the proclaimed educational reforms and goals of both the Thai and Japanese education ministries in developing their students' communicative English abilities, researchers have identified a number of issues in the classrooms themselves that seem to be hampering EFL efforts. This section will look at some concerns such as teacher ability and qualifications, the relationships between actual EFL learning goals, student motivation, and EFL pedagogy, as well as the influence of culture in communicative EFL.

3.1 EFL Teachers

The teacher is often considered to be a major part of the equation when evaluating students' educational success. Teachers' qualifications, their experience and abilities within their field, their understanding of and ability to utilize the educational methodologies to help students attain their learning goals, as well as their ability to motivate and inspire their students to learn are all important components that contribute to their teaching effectiveness. Developing students L2 communication abilities in particular relies on non-direct teaching methods, the experiential discovery of the L2 on an individual basis, as well as focus on fluency over form (Wells, 2009; Paul, 2003, Cameron, 2001). Such pedagogical traits are unique to TEFL, particularly when compared to the teaching of other school subjects. However, researchers have identified issues with teachers at certain stages in EFL education in both Thailand and Japan that have a negative effect on developing their students' communicative competencies.

In both Thailand and Japan, most student's very first formal learning experience with English starts at elementary school. This stage is critical in communicative EFL, as many

researchers have identified young learners as social learners with the innate ability to learn language by creating meaning through actual use of the language with others (Wells, 2009; Cameron, 2001). Teaching English at this level requires high proficiency in the L2 in order to be an appropriate model, as well as being able to identify the learning needs of students on an individual level (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). Training in EFL pedagogy specifically for young learners is also a necessity.

Unfortunately, for most elementary EFL teachers in these two countries, it seems as though training is far behind the ministries' goals. In Thai elementary schools, where English is taught to all grade levels 1-6 and has been a part of the curriculum since the 1960's, it has been found that 65 percent of elementary English teachers were not English majors and actually are teachers of other subjects that were assigned to take on the additional English class load (Sermsoongward and Tantipongsanuruk, 2015: 48). Punthumasen identifies that many have no self-confidence in teaching communicative English and also refers to a study that reveals that many Thai teachers, after beginning teacher training in EFL, decided to quit, leading to a high turnover rate of English teachers (2007: 9).

In Japanese elementary schools, where English is taught at only the fifth and sixth grade levels, the situation is not much different. When English was officially incorporated into the elementary school system, existing homeroom teachers were assigned the extra duties for teaching English, most of which have very low L2 ability themselves (Butler, 2004) and little to no training in TEFL (Tahira, 2012: 6). Similar to Thailand, the additional English lesson responsibilities even led some teachers to consider early retirement (AERA, 2008, cited in Hall et al., 2012).

Beyond the elementary school level, it seems that although most teachers may actually be teaching a field that they have majored in themselves, their own English abilities and the pressures of the educational systems in which they work still have negative effects on their effectiveness at teaching EFL for communicative purposes.

Researchers show that many secondary level teachers do not have an understanding of, or confidence in utilizing communicative teaching methods in their classrooms in both Thailand (Sermsoongward and Tantipongsanuruk, 2015: 48) and Japan (Tahira, 2012 5-6). It is also pointed out that Thai EFL teachers are often overworked with multiple class and faculty duties, and that many pick up extra work to supplement their income (Punthumasen, 2007: 6, Noom-ura, 2013: 2). In Japan as well, there is a call for improved teacher training and qualifications (Kikuchi, 2012; Nishino and Watanabe, 2008). From the author's own experience of teaching EFL in Japan for 20 years, he can personally attest to the similarly heavy work load of Japanese teachers of English (JTE's) with regular classes, club and sports responsibilities, as well as the administrative obligations of teachers at all levels of education in Japan.

As previously noted, native speakers are also utilized to certain degrees in the English classrooms of both Thailand (EP Schools, TET Program) and Japan (ALT system). Although, upon closer inspection, it seems that neither country may be getting the maximum yield on

their endeavor and investment with these programs. Punthumasen mentions that, in Thailand, many native speaker teachers in EP schools do not have degrees in teaching nor have they even majored in the subject they are teaching (2007: 7). Additionally, there are issues with native speakers frequently jumping from school to school motivated by a better salary, and many of them are only employed on short-term visas, leading to a high turnover rate (Punthumasen, 2007: 7). Japan's own government-funded JET assistant language teacher system is also not without its issues, as the system does not require any teaching-specific education background and provides minimal EFL training to ALTs in the form of an annual conference (Ohtani, 2010: 39-40). Beyond sufficient TEFL knowledge and qualifications, communication and cultural barriers between native speakers and local teachers in both Thailand and Japan remain major bottlenecks in the effective implementation of native speakers to help toward students' communicative EFL development.

3.2 Actual EFL Goals, Pedagogy, and Learner Motivation

The education ministries of both Thailand and Japan have set the focus of current EFL goals in developing students' communicative abilities. With such goals, language classes should be emphasizing fluency over accuracy, and encouraging students to experiment with using the language communicatively (which means making mistakes), in order to construct their own knowledge of English as a means of communication (Wells, 2009; Paul, 2003, Cameron, 2001). Research has reported, however, that this is typically not the pedagogy practiced in Thai and Japanese classrooms, and problems with the ways in which EFL is being taught in the classroom are not entirely due to the teacher's shortcomings.

Although communicative abilities are the purported educational goals of EFL in both countries, in reality, high-stakes entrance exams and standardized tests that do not emphasize communicative abilities (such as the Ordinary National Educational Test in Thailand and the National Center Test in Japan) remain the true motive for many EFL teachers and students from the secondary level and beyond. Sermsongsward and Tantipongsanuruk report that in many cases in Thailand, English is a required subject on the entrance examinations from primary all the way up to university level (2015: 46), and that in reality, Thai students study English for the examination, not for communication (2015: 49). Similarly in Japan, researchers have found that as such entrance exams remain the ultimate goal of English education in JHS and SHS classrooms, teachers teach the test (Kikuchi, 2006; Wada, 2002, cited in Stewart, 2009). Additionally, as the National Center Test in Japan is only administered once a year, students who fail to attain a certain grade must remain out of school studying to retake the exam for an entire year or longer. With such high-stakes, it is no wonder that success on such exams dictate not only learning goals, but learner preferences and pedagogy as well.

Both Thailand and Japan have EFL roots in grammar-translation methodology, and despite current ministry goals, with the prevalence of teaching the test it seems that teacher-centered, non-communicative classes focused on grammar-translation still remain prevalent today. Bruner reaffirms that communicative English skill cannot be developed through

such pedagogy as 'language is acquired not in the role of spectator but through use... being exposed to a flow of language is not nearly so important as using it in the midst of doing.' (1990: 70). Researchers state that, in Thailand, because students know they need English for entrance examinations, they focus their studies mainly on form and accuracy (Sermsoongward and Tantipongsanuruk, 2015: 49) which demand an editorial teaching and learning style (Wiriyachitra, 2002: 2). Similarly in Japan, standardized English language exams are shown to focus on reading comprehension, translation ability, and vocabulary and grammar knowledge (Kikuchi, 2006; Wada, 2002, cited in Stewart, 2009), and because of this, Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) continue to use teaching approaches in which classes are teacher-led, highly structured, focus on recurring language structures and, fundamentally, conducted in L1 (Humphries & Burns, 2015).

Under enormous pressure to gain good marks on such critical examinations where communicative EFL abilities are not emphasized, it only makes sense that learners' motivations would also be geared towards developing the skills the exams require. This is unfortunate, as that in both Thailand and Japan, the EFL classroom is typically the only context where students have the opportunity to be exposed to English (Punthumasen, 2007: 3; Noom-ura, 2013: 1) and as such, it is unlikely that students will have the opportunity to develop communicative skills outside of class.

The EFL system in both countries seems to feed into itself. As teacher-centered, non-communicative learning styles become the norm, students also display rejection towards communicative TEFL methodology. Researchers point out that the more that teachers focus on accuracy over fluency, students become increasingly reluctant to speak English for fear of making mistakes in both Thailand (Sermsoongward and Tantipongsanuruk, 2015: 49) and Japan (Harumi, 2011: 264). Within such a system, students prefer more passive, teacher-led teaching styles (Sakui, 2007), and it becomes increasingly difficult to get them to join as active participants in communicative EFL classes (Nishino and Watanabe, 2008). In Japan, students may outright refuse to reply in English in the classroom, by either replying in the L1, speaking with a purposeful Japanese phonetic pronunciation of their English, or just not replying at all (Humphries and Stroupe, 2014).

Other issues which seem to exacerbate the difficulty of focusing on communicative TEFL are class size, class hours, and L1 interference. Tahira mentions large class size as an issue for Japanese EFL classrooms (2012: 6), as does Wiriyachitra for Thailand, where there may be 45 to 60 students in a class (2002: 2). The overwhelming student to teacher ratio, in conjunction with limited class hours, contributes to teaching styles that fossilize into rote learning, teaching grammar and translation, with L1 as the medium of instruction (Noom-ura, 2013: 2). Researchers also point out considerable problems with interference from the L1 concerning pronunciation and grammar in both Thailand (Wiriyachitra, 2002: 2) and Japan (Ikegashira et al., 2009).

3.3 The Influence of Culture in Communicative EFL

Communicative EFL pedagogies such as the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method that is officially advocated in both Thailand and Japan are contingent on the active participation of the students in interactive classroom exchanges using English for communication. As has been pointed out in this paper so far, teacher abilities, actual learning goals, and teaching styles all tend to promote a system that is anything but communicative. Learner motivations and preferred learning styles were undoubtedly forged from these influences, but there may in fact be additional cultural influences, with scope that goes well beyond the EFL classroom, and that hamper the fundamental principles of CLT. The Asian classroom and education in Asia in general has a long history strongly connected to Confucian ideals of direct teaching, where the teacher is seen as master, and their knowledge is bestowed to their students who passively receive it (Burrows, 2008: 17).

Both Thailand and Japan share this deep-rooted cultural conceptualization of the direct transmission of knowledge within education to some degree, and it is very much at odds with the roles of teacher and student in CLT. In CLT, teachers take on much more of an assisting and guiding role, while allowing students to experiment and discover language use for themselves. Active participation by students using the language communicatively is key in CLT. However, cultural norms that value respect for hierarchy, saving face, avoiding risks, and maintaining a sense of status quo in both countries seem to derail efforts toward CLT. Nguyen points out that in Thai culture, out of respect, Thai students may not feel comfortable asking questions, voicing their opinions, participating in discussions, and responding to questions (n.d., 3). Similarly in Japan, King illustrates research that claims Japanese students may be hypersensitive in the classroom, feeling anxiety about making mistakes and being ridiculed or appearing conceited if they provide a correct answer, and therefore they prefer to stay silent (2013, cited in Humphries et al., 2015). Additionally, Harumi confirms that silence in communication is acceptable as a cultural norm in the Japanese classroom (2011: 261).

It can be argued that culture is indivisible from language, and the EFL classroom is where this becomes painfully obvious. In many Asian languages, language forms change to match the comparative hierarchal (age, gender, social status, etc.) rank of the interlocutors. However, such nuances are typically glossed over in communicative English, and as such, it can cause much distress for EFL learners to *speak in ways* so foreign to their own culture. Thai students have been found to avoid taking risks that take them away from their cultural norms (Sermsongsward and Tantipongsanuruk, 2015: 49). In Japan as well, where indirectness and avoiding confrontation are highly valued cultural norms, EFL classroom activities such as debate and affirming one's correctness over another through logical arguments are quite uncomfortable for students. As previously mentioned, Humphries and Stroupe identified that Japanese students exhibited a variety of strategies in order to avoid responding to questions in English (2014, cited in Humphries et al., 2015: 165).

The cultural values of modesty and deferment in both countries, in conjunction with students' preferences towards teacher-centered, passive learning styles focusing on teaching

the test and accuracy over fluency seem to be at odds with ministry-mandated aims of English for communication. In Japan in particular, Jackson and Kennett argue that the stereotype of the inability of Japanese to speak English, as well as the ways that the failure of TEFL in Japanese schools is perpetuated by the mass media on popular TV shows contributes to a defeatist attitude towards EFL (2013). With such a high degree of cultural homogeneity in Japan, the negative effect of such attitudes means many learners give up before even starting their EFL studies.

4. Summary

The similarity in performance by Thailand and Japan on the TOEIC and TOEFL tests in recent years motivated the author to look for further consistencies within the EFL contexts of both nations. Through examples of research on the current EFL contexts, this brief report has attempted to disclose and compare issues that seem to be contributing to the failure of communicative TEFL efforts in both countries. Issues such as teacher ability, actual EFL learning goals, student motivation, EFL pedagogy, as well as the influence of culture have been identified as contributing factors. The issues at hand are quite complex and present a formidable challenge.

With educational obstacles that are so deeply-rooted in each country, positively affecting any single one of the issues may not likely be enough to induce change on the system as a whole. Both Thailand and Japan have had decades to tweak their existing EFL systems, as well as having the examples of the educational systems of other countries around the world. However, despite top-down policy reforms aimed towards positively affecting EFL ability, the reality is teaching contexts that are resistant to change. If these countries truly hope to positively affect students' communicative abilities, yet another fresh coat of paint will do little but mask the necessity of a major educational overhaul.

Teacher training in both communicative EFL and the teacher's own L2 ability are certainly realistic goals for each country to strive for if they can commit the funding for it. But will better-abled teachers alone be able to overcome the influence of the standardized examination systems that ultimately command student learning goals? It may be unrealistic to expect such exams to suddenly disappear outright. Unless the existing examinations (at all levels) are retooled to evaluate student's communicative EFL ability, and provide students with motivation to attain those skills, then teacher training alone might not be enough.

Would better trained and qualified teachers implemented in conjunction with decisively establishing communicative EFL goals be enough to transcend the age-old cultural norms of each county that appear be out of sync with communicative TEFL methodologies? From a Western standpoint, a remodeling of the current conceptualizations of what it means *to teach* and *to learn* in such contexts would perhaps be the most effective tactic in inciting a ripple effect towards more communicative EFL education. Would such fundamental changes in education be unattainable? Might there be smaller-scale strategies that could positively affect

the educational systems as a whole?

Through the issues this exploratory report has brought to light, many new questions and concerns have emerged. However, the scope of this report is quite limited, and as such, many of these matters require further, much more in-depth research in order to advance towards a better understanding of how to positively affect more effective communicative TEFL in both Thailand and Japan.

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