

# English Language Learning in Thailand: Policy, Practice, and Pedagogy Teaching Approaches & Methodologies

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Received: June 13, 2025 Revised: June 22, 2025 Accepted: July 02, 2025

## Abstract

English language learning in Thailand has gained increasing importance as the country seeks to participate more fully in the global economy and regional organizations such as ASEAN. Despite policy reforms and curriculum changes, challenges persist in classroom practice, teacher preparation, and learner outcomes. This article reviews the evolution of English language policy in Thailand, examines current teaching practices and pedagogical approaches, discusses persistent barriers, and offers recommendations for enhancing English proficiency among Thai learners. The analysis draws on recent research and theoretical frameworks to highlight the interplay between policy intentions, classroom realities, and socio-cultural factors influencing English education in Thailand.

**Keywords:** English language learning, Thailand, language policy, pedagogy

## Introduction

In the 21st century, English has emerged as a dominant global language, serving as the main medium for communication, commerce, and education worldwide (Crystal, 2012). For Thailand, English proficiency is increasingly seen as essential for economic growth, regional integration, and individual advancement (Kirkpatrick, 2010). As a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Thailand has adopted policies to improve English education and align with international standards. However, despite these efforts, the country continues to face challenges in achieving high levels of English proficiency, as reflected in regional and global rankings (Education First, 2023). This article explores the complexities of English language learning in Thailand, focusing on policy, practice, and pedagogy.

### Policy: Evolution and Current Initiatives

English language education in Thailand dates back to the early 20th century, when it was first introduced into the national curriculum as a foreign language subject (Noom-ura, 2013). Over the decades, policy reforms have aimed to improve English teaching and learning outcomes, particularly in response to globalization and the demands of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

The Ministry of Education has made English a compulsory subject from primary through tertiary levels (Wongsothorn et al., 2018). Recent policy initiatives include the introduction of bilingual programs, alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and teacher professional development programs (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Richards, 2015). These efforts reflect a recognition of English as both a tool for national development and a means of individual empowerment.

Despite ambitious policy goals, implementation often lags behind intentions. Disparities between urban and rural schools, limited budgets, and a lack of qualified English teachers impede effective policy execution (Noom-ura, 2013; Baker, 2015). Furthermore, educational reforms sometimes emphasize exam results over communicative competence, reinforcing traditional teaching methods.

### Practice: Classroom Realities and Learner Outcomes

In practice, English classrooms in Thailand commonly rely on traditional, teacher-centered approaches such as grammar-translation and rote memorization (Khamkhien, 2010). While these methods may help students pass written examinations, they often fail to develop communicative competence or confidence in using English in real-life situations.

Research indicates that many Thai learners experience high levels of language anxiety, low confidence, and a fear of making mistakes, which limits their willingness to communicate (Trang et al., 2013). Access to quality English education is also uneven, with students in urban areas and international schools enjoying greater exposure to native-like

English and modern teaching resources, while those in rural or under-resourced schools face persistent disadvantages (Education First, 2023).

Teacher preparation is a key factor influencing classroom practice. Many teachers lack proficiency in English and have limited exposure to communicative or task-based teaching methods (Noom-ura, 2013). Professional development opportunities are often insufficient, especially in remote areas.

#### **Pedagogy: Approaches and Challenges**

Pedagogical approaches to English language teaching in Thailand are evolving, but challenges remain. While recent reforms encourage communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based learning, and student-centered instruction, actual classroom practice frequently falls short of these ideals (Richards, 2015).

Barriers to effective pedagogy include large class sizes, time constraints, a focus on high-stakes testing, and cultural tendencies that discourage risk-taking and error-making (Khamkhien, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, many teachers continue to prioritize grammar and vocabulary acquisition over skills such as speaking and listening.

Motivation is another critical factor. Thai students are typically instrumentally motivated, viewing English as a pathway to better education and employment rather than as a means of cross-cultural communication (Lamb, 2012; Wongsothorn et al., 2018). While instrumental motivation supports persistence, integrative motivation and positive attitudes towards English-speaking cultures can foster more meaningful engagement and higher proficiency (Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021).

#### **Discussion: Addressing Persistent Barriers**

Improving English language learning in Thailand requires addressing interconnected challenges at the policy, practice, and pedagogical levels. Key recommendations include:

- 1. Enhancing Teacher Training:** Invest in comprehensive professional development that equips teachers with communicative, interactive, and student-centered pedagogical skills (Noom-ura, 2013).
- 2. Balancing Assessment:** Shift the focus from rote memorization and exam preparation to authentic, performance-based assessment that values communicative competence (Richards, 2015).
- 3. Reducing Inequality:** Allocate resources to bridge the urban-rural divide in access to qualified teachers, technology, and learning materials (Education First, 2023).
- 4. Fostering Motivation:** Encourage integrative motivation by exposing learners to diverse cultures and real-world contexts through multimedia, exchange programs, and project-based learning (Gardner, 2010; Baker, 2015).
- 5. Aligning Policy and Practice:** Ensure that policy initiatives are accompanied by practical support, ongoing monitoring, and adaptation to local contexts (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997).

#### **Problems of English Language Learning in Thailand: Policy, Practice, and Pedagogy**

##### **1. Policy-Practice Gaps:**

Despite ambitious government policies and curriculum reforms aimed at improving English proficiency, there is often a disconnect between policy objectives and actual classroom implementation. This gap is exacerbated by limited monitoring, insufficient resources, and inconsistent execution across different regions and school types (Noom-ura, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2010).

##### **2. Traditional Teaching Methods:**

English instruction in Thailand remains largely teacher-centered, relying on grammar-translation, rote memorization, and exam-focused learning. These approaches do not prioritize communicative competence or real-life language use, resulting in students who can pass written tests but struggle with speaking and listening (Khamkhien, 2010).

##### **3. Insufficient Teacher Preparation:**

Many English teachers in Thailand lack adequate language proficiency and training in modern, communicative teaching methodologies. Professional development opportunities are uneven, especially in rural areas, leading to ineffective classroom practices and limited student engagement (Noom-ura, 2013).

##### **4. Resource Disparities and Inequality:**

Access to quality English education, teaching materials, and technological resources is unevenly distributed. Urban and elite schools often have more qualified teachers and better resources, while rural and underfunded schools face significant disadvantages, widening the educational gap (Education First, 2023).

### **5. Learner Motivation and Affective Barriers:**

Thai students often exhibit instrumental motivation—seeing English as a tool for exams or jobs—but may lack integrative motivation and confidence to use English in authentic contexts. High levels of language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-esteem further hinder active participation and communicative skill development (Trang et al., 2013; Wongsothorn et al., 2018).

### **6. Assessment Misalignment:**

The current assessment system emphasizes grammar and reading comprehension over speaking and listening skills. This misalignment discourages the development of communicative competence and fails to reflect students' actual ability to use English for communication (Richards, 2015).

### **7. Cultural and Socio-Economic Factors:**

Cultural norms that discourage risk-taking in language learning, combined with socio-economic disparities, impact students' opportunities and willingness to practice English both inside and outside the classroom (Khamkhien, 2010; Baker, 2015).

### **Summary**

Collectively, these problems hinder the effectiveness of English language learning in Thailand, limiting learners' ability to achieve communicative competence and reducing the nation's global competitiveness. Addressing these challenges requires alignment of policy and practice, modernizing pedagogy, improving teacher training, reducing inequalities, and fostering supportive, communicative learning environments.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Understanding English language learning in Thailand requires an examination of theories related to language policy, educational practice, and pedagogy, as well as frameworks that address learner motivation and outcomes. This framework provides a lens to analyze the systemic, instructional, and cognitive factors that influence English learning.

#### **1. Language Policy and Planning Theory**

Language policy and planning theory, as articulated by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), provides a foundation for analyzing Thailand's national English education policies. It emphasizes how governments formulate and implement language-in-education policies to achieve social, economic, and cultural goals. In Thailand, compulsory English education, bilingual programs, and ASEAN-aligned curricula reflect policy decisions aimed at preparing learners for global participation. However, policy-practice gaps highlight challenges in implementation, resource allocation, and monitoring.

#### **2. Curriculum and Pedagogical Theory**

Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978)

Constructivist theory emphasizes learner-centered education, active engagement, and social interaction. In language learning, it supports communicative and task-based approaches that encourage students to use English meaningfully. Traditional Thai classrooms, which are often teacher-centered and exam-focused, contrast with constructivist principles, leading to limited communicative competence.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Theory (Littlewood, 2004)

CLT emphasizes the development of functional language skills for real-life communication. It prioritizes speaking, listening, and interaction over rote memorization. The theory explains why Thai students may struggle in practical communication despite years of formal study when CLT is insufficiently implemented.

#### **3. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theories**

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985)

Krashen posits that comprehensible input—language slightly above learners' current proficiency level—is essential for effective language acquisition. Limited exposure to authentic English in Thailand restricts learners' input, impeding progress.

Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985)

Learners' emotions, such as anxiety, low motivation, or fear of making mistakes, can act as an "affective filter" that blocks language acquisition. Thai students often experience language anxiety, which limits participation and hinders communicative competence.

#### **4. Motivation and Attitude Theories**

Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (1985, 2010)

Gardner emphasizes that motivation and attitudes toward the language and its speakers influence learning outcomes. In Thailand, instrumental motivation (e.g., exams and employment) dominates, while integrative motivation (cultural interest and desire for communication) is less prominent. Positive attitudes and motivation are key to sustaining engagement.

#### Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2009)

This theory highlights the importance of learners' self-concept in language learning. The Ideal L2 Self (vision of oneself as a competent English user) and the Ought-to L2 Self (external pressures and obligations) influence effort and persistence. These frameworks explain how learner identity and societal expectations shape English learning outcomes in Thailand.

#### 5. Socio-Cultural Theory of Language Learning

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory posits that learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural context. In Thailand, classroom norms, respect for authority, and peer interactions affect participation and communicative practice. Opportunities for collaboration, discussion, and authentic use of English are critical for language development.

### Summary

The theoretical framework for understanding English language learning in Thailand integrates:

- 1) Language policy and planning theory,
- 2) Curriculum and pedagogical theories (constructivism and CLT),
- 3) SLA theories (input hypothesis and affective filter),
- 4) Motivation and attitude frameworks (Gardner and Dörnyei), and
- 5) Socio-cultural theory.

Together, these theories explain why policy, practice, and pedagogy interact to shape English learning outcomes. They provide a comprehensive lens to identify challenges, analyze classroom practices, and propose reforms to enhance proficiency, motivation, and communicative competence among Thai learners.

### Significance of the Study

The study of English language learning in Thailand, focusing on policy, practice, and pedagogy, carries theoretical, practical, and national significance. Understanding the challenges and dynamics in this area provides insights that can improve language education outcomes and inform broader educational strategies.

#### 1. Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to the body of knowledge in applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and language policy research. By examining English learning in the Thai context, the research provides empirical evidence on how language policy, pedagogical approaches, and learner motivation interact to influence proficiency. It also tests and extends theoretical frameworks, such as Gardner's socio-educational model, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, and constructivist pedagogical principles, highlighting their applicability in a non-native, foreign language context.

#### 2. Practical Significance for Education

The findings can guide educators in developing effective classroom strategies that improve English learning outcomes. For example:

- Implementing communicative and student-centered teaching methods to replace rote memorization.
- Designing curricula and activities that balance instrumental and integrative motivation.
- Creating supportive learning environments to reduce anxiety and enhance participation.
- Integrating authentic English use through multimedia, project-based learning, and interaction with native or proficient speakers.

#### 3. Policy and National Significance

The study informs policymakers and educational administrators about the gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities. Insights from the research can contribute to:

- Improving teacher training programs and professional development initiatives.
- Allocating resources equitably between urban and rural schools.
- Revising national curriculum standards to emphasize communicative competence alongside exam performance.

- Strengthening Thailand's position in regional and global contexts by enhancing English proficiency among students, which supports economic development, international collaboration, and ASEAN integration.

#### 4. Socio-Cultural and Equity Significance

English proficiency is linked to social mobility and access to global opportunities. By identifying barriers such as unequal access to quality instruction, cultural attitudes toward language learning, and classroom anxiety, this study can guide interventions to promote equity in English education. Enhancing English learning opportunities can empower learners from diverse backgrounds, fostering confidence, intercultural competence, and lifelong learning skills.

##### Summary

In summary, the study is significant because it:

1. Advances theoretical understanding of SLA, motivation, and language policy in a Thai context.
2. Provides practical guidance for teachers to improve pedagogical approaches and learner outcomes.
3. Offers policy recommendations for bridging gaps between national goals and classroom implementation.
4. Addresses socio-cultural and equity issues, ensuring that English learning contributes to individual empowerment and national development.

This significance underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach that integrates policy, pedagogy, and learner-centered practices to enhance English language learning in Thailand.

#### Knowledge from Research

Research on English language learning in Thailand has revealed valuable insights into the interplay of policy, practice, pedagogy, and learner outcomes. The accumulated knowledge helps explain persistent challenges and informs strategies to improve English proficiency among Thai learners.

##### 1. Policy Insights

- **National Curriculum and Reform Efforts:** English has been a compulsory subject in Thailand's education system, with various reforms introduced to enhance proficiency, including bilingual programs, integration with ASEAN standards, and increased instructional hours (Noom-ura, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2010).
- **Policy-Practice Gap:** Studies indicate that while policies are well-intentioned, implementation is uneven, with urban schools often benefiting from more resources, trained teachers, and technological support than rural schools (Education First, 2023).
- **Examination-Oriented Policies:** The emphasis on standardized testing prioritizes grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills, often at the expense of speaking, listening, and communicative competence (Khamkhien, 2010).

##### 2. Pedagogical Insights

- **Teacher-Centered Instruction:** Traditional teaching methods dominate classrooms, with heavy reliance on rote memorization, grammar translation, and lecture-based instruction (Noom-ura, 2013).
- **Communicative Competence Challenges:** Despite years of English study, students often struggle with practical communication skills due to limited opportunities for interaction and insufficient student-centered activities (Littlewood, 2004).
- **Teacher Proficiency and Training:** Research highlights that some English teachers have inadequate language proficiency or lack exposure to contemporary pedagogical methods, affecting teaching quality (Khamkhien, 2010).

##### 3. Learner-Related Insights

- **Motivation and Attitudes:** Thai learners display predominantly instrumental motivation—learning English for exams, employment, or higher education. Integrative motivation, related to cultural interest or identity, is less prevalent but supports sustained engagement (Gardner, 2010; Wongsothorn et al., 2018).
- **Affective Factors:** Anxiety, fear of mistakes, and low confidence are common barriers that prevent students from actively participating and practicing English, particularly in speaking and listening activities (Trang et al., 2013).

- **Exposure and Practice Limitations:** Learners rarely use English outside school, limiting authentic input and opportunities for meaningful practice (Baker, 2015).

#### 4. Socio-Cultural and Equity Insights

- **Resource Disparities:** Students in urban or private schools typically access better materials, qualified teachers, and technology, whereas rural learners face challenges that widen proficiency gaps (Education First, 2023).
- **Cultural Norms:** Respect for authority and fear of error often reduce classroom participation, affecting communicative practice and active engagement (Wongsothorn et al., 2018).

#### 5. Knowledge for Practice and Policy

- **Curricular Reform:** Research suggests shifting from exam-oriented curricula toward communicative and project-based approaches to enhance real-world English competence.
- **Teacher Development:** Professional training programs focusing on modern pedagogies, classroom management, and communicative teaching strategies are critical.
- **Student Engagement:** Strategies to enhance motivation, reduce anxiety, and foster integrative attitudes can support sustained learning.
- **Equity Measures:** Addressing urban-rural disparities and providing equal access to resources, technology, and qualified teachers can improve nationwide English proficiency.

#### Summary

Research shows that English language learning in Thailand is influenced by the interaction of policy decisions, classroom practices, pedagogical approaches, and learner motivation. While national policies aim to enhance proficiency, gaps in implementation, traditional teaching methods, limited exposure, affective barriers, and socio-cultural factors continue to challenge effective learning. Addressing these issues requires coordinated reforms in policy, pedagogy, teacher training, and student support to improve both proficiency and communicative competence.

#### Conclusion

English language learning in Thailand is shaped by a complex interaction of policy, classroom practice, pedagogy, and learner-related factors. While English is emphasized in the national curriculum and recognized as crucial for global engagement, persistent challenges continue to affect learners' proficiency and communicative competence.

Policy-related issues include inconsistencies in implementation, a strong focus on standardized testing, and gaps between reform intentions and classroom realities. These challenges are compounded by pedagogical practices that rely heavily on teacher-centered instruction, rote memorization, and limited opportunities for authentic language use. As a result, Thai students often excel in grammar and reading but struggle with listening, speaking, and practical communication skills.

Learner-related factors, including motivation, attitudes, language anxiety, and low confidence, further influence learning outcomes. Instrumental motivation predominates, driving students to achieve academic or career-related goals, while integrative motivation and cultural interest, though less common, support long-term engagement. Socio-cultural norms, such as respect for authority and fear of making mistakes, can also inhibit active participation and communicative practice.

The knowledge from research highlights the need for comprehensive reforms that integrate policy, pedagogy, and learner support. These include promoting student-centered and communicative approaches, enhancing teacher training, providing authentic opportunities for English use, and addressing disparities in resources and access. By addressing these interrelated factors, Thailand can improve the quality of English education, fostering learners' proficiency, confidence, and readiness to participate effectively in global and regional contexts.

In summary, English language learning in Thailand is a multifaceted endeavor. Effective improvement requires coordinated action across policy, practice, and pedagogy, with attention to learners' motivation, attitudes, and socio-cultural context. By aligning educational strategies with both national and global demands, Thailand can equip its students with the language skills necessary for academic, professional, and social success in an interconnected world.

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