E-Learning as a Strategy to Teach English in Thailand: A Professional Development Model to Support Teacher Growth[*]

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Thai school age students as young as eight years old are increasingly being immersed in the Internet world, and as a result, they are accelerating their learning and communication skills in English even without noticing. For educators, the ICT (information communication technology) revolution that has occurred in the last few decades needs to be both understood and taken seriously. The potential for e-learning to engage Thai learners and raise the levels for student performance standards clearly necessitates changes in the curriculum, the resources that teachers use and more importantly what teachers understand to be their role in an increasingly wireless world. This paper outlines a professional development model that was developed to support teachers who are reluctant or less able to implement e-learning with opportunities to explore the potential of education related Internet sites based upon their personal levels of awareness, ICT skills and confidence.

Keywords: e-learning, English teaching, teacher training

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a model that was developed to support primary English language teachers in Thailand to improve their awareness levels of the potential of the Internet to improve their planning and teaching. The model was implemented with grades four, five and six teachers and students in a sampling of three private schools in Thailand. The study was conducted to answer the question: What represents a useful English language-based model to support teachers to incorporate e-learning for school age children in Thailand?

Literature Review

The Ministry of Education identified areas of weakness in the educational system for Thailand and subsequently issued a policy document in the form of the "Basic Education Curriculum B. E. in 2001" to guide educators in the process of modernizing and improving program delivery in Thai schools. A focus for the mandated change placed a greater emphasis upon the importance of English language instruction to build up competencies in using languages for communication and seeking knowledge from various extensive resource centers in the information age (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2001, p. 2). The Ministry mandate also placed an emphasis upon the integration of technology management as a strategy to develop thinking skills, ability to

do work and adjust to change in society (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2001, p. 6).

The e-learning as a strategy to teach English model was developed to assist Thai primary teachers in addressing the many obstacles that challenge them in responding to the Ministry's mandate. Thailand's education policy statement reflects the literature about learning theory and cognitive development and, in particular, addresses the research related to Blooms' taxonomy of learning which for Thai teachers represented a shift away from a traditional knowledge or content-based curriculum to a delivery model that emphasized a balanced curriculum focusing on knowledge, skills and values learning (Bloom, 1956).

The question for Thai educators then was how to achieve the mandate given the very real obstacles which faced them. There is a world shortage of teachers and this particularly applies to educators who are qualified to teach English. High quality English language teaching resources whether in the form of reference materials to support teacher planning and instruction, visual teaching aides for use in the classroom or student workbooks are not readily available and are very expensive for Thai teachers and students. In the past, Thai teachers did not benefit from experiences that allowed them to recognize that the Internet represented the potential to overcome many of the obstacles that faced them. The purpose of this study was to support teachers and school administrators in making that connection.

The study targeted primary English teachers and their students for two reasons: primary teachers as a group appeared to be more reluctant to change and lacked ICT (information communication technology) resources to do so. Educators know that the foundations of students' success in school and life are set down in the early years (Norris & Bouchard, 1980). In Thailand, students begin to study English in the primary grades where the ministry has stipulated a concentration up to 50% of instructional time to be allocated for reading, writing and calculation (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2001, p. 13). The literature concerning literacy development confirms that language programs particularly for young learners, should not be viewed as an isolated subject in a child's day (Booth, 1999). The integration of English language instruction and technology achieves a natural fit that supports teachers and students to use Web-based language applications in ways that augment the regular curriculum.

The e-learning, as a strategy to teach English to model, was developed to incorporate the literature about adult learning theory. Scholars in the filed of andragogy have established that children and adults do not have the same learning preferences, styles or needs. Knowles and Associates (1984) in their book, *Andragogy in Action*, identified several principles that contribute to effective adult learning design. To summarize selections from the literature, the authors indicate that adults need to know why they are being asked to acquire new learning. Adults prefer to learn through direct applications which relate to them personally and are natural problem solvers who bring a great deal of previous life experiences to their learning. For adults, there is a relationship between trail and error and levels of satisfaction during the learning process which affects their ability to maintain ongoing levels of motivation.

The work of Mackey and Gass (2005) in the field of research design offered applications to support that the development of the model were integrated with the theory about stages of the learning cycle. This entails a spiraling or repeating of a set of deliberate steps for the purposes of acquiring new learning. The e-learning was designed to be process driven and involved ongoing steps of the learning process (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Learning cycle components from the literature were renamed as a modification to assist teachers to associate their learning while using the model to improve their readiness to implement e-learning. For the purposes of the study, the learning cycle steps became to explore the Internet, experiment with Internet resources and ideas,

engage students with Internet teaching strategies and evaluate the results in terms of teacher satisfaction and student outcomes.

The e-learning model attempted to align the principles of action research design and change theory as these apply to the differing needs of both teachers and school administrators who are responsible to support teachers change and grow.

The implementation phase related to any curriculum change, requires time, encouragement and support (Fullan, 2001). Change cannot occur where there is no tolerance for risk taking and is contingent upon preparation and commitment. Change for teachers is best provided within a context of support where there is a clear realistic teacher training plan, support with appropriate resources and realistic timeframes allotted for practice. Quality teacher development programs are contingent upon encouragement, supervision and accountability. Steven Covey (1995) in his book *First Things First* illustrates this well. He contends that leaders need to identify the critical elements of their work and to move forward with a view to getting people to commit to the change.

The literature concerning educational change is helpful in understanding the process that curriculum content or program delivery implies. Michael Fullan (2001), in his work at the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto confirmed that educators advance through the stages of awareness, training and resource development to partial and then full implementation over a period of ten years. It is not reasonable to expect teachers to get it right at the first time (Bender, 2002).

In his book, *Bringing out the Best in People*, McGinnis (1985) argued that little can be achieved through criticism and the application of pressure that forces teachers to change: Study more, learn faster and attend training sessions that will fix them. Negative messages about the perceived inadequacies of teachers and their performance are not motivators for professional learners. A deeper understanding of the factors which contribute to why teachers are the way they are ought to be studied and analyzed, so that a sound foundation from which teachers can grow is achieved.

In Thailand, an innovative project examined the responsibilities of school principals and their role as e-learning facilitators (Wiboonuppatum, 2006). The research/study was created to investigate ways that schools could utilize ICT more effectively. Two factors greatly contributed to the success of the study: It focused upon building partnerships within the university community and the study was based upon adult learning theory. Under the leadership of Thailand's Bureau of Education Innovation, two school projects were initiated and supervised by specialists from Silapakorn University (Sanamchandra Palace Campus) and King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok. The task was to explore new and more effective ways to address teachers' professional development. As volunteers in the project, teachers were able to use a problem solving model to identify personal entry points for the study and to move forward based upon their individual needs and levels of ICT skill. The school principals ensured that teachers had access to the help they required by opening computer labs to teachers in all subject areas. A site leader in the role of expert teacher was assigned to the lab to act as a mentor for the teachers and a resource for students. In this way, teachers improved their awareness and ICT skills and reported that they were able to transfer their learning directly to lesson planning and teaching. The model incorporated a balance of formal training and opportunities for teachers to experiment, take risks, self evaluate and direct their own learning.

Teacher development strategies were managed by using an inquiry model that began with identifying questions, implementation of a variety of data gathering methods and included a formal monitoring and feedback component. The importance to the success of the project was the agreed upon values from which the

teacher's learning would proceed. Each school principal established an operational structure to assist the learning process and developed incentives to acknowledge professional growth and to nurture teachers as learners (Kouzes & Posner, 2003).

Factors Affecting the Technical Skills Gap Between Teachers and Students in Thailand

Historically, teachers had a lot in common with the students that they taught. For centuries, teachers perpetuated the values and norms within Thailand's cultural structure. Presently, in Thailand as in other nations, there is a significant disconnect between the world that teachers grew up in and the world of their students. Thai teachers seemingly have been caught unaware and are disadvantaged, because the rate of change related to technical advances in society over the last 50 years has been unprecedented. The change process is difficult for most teachers; however, this is compounded in a culture that places high importance on teachers to be the experts and to maintain the norms of a long established teaching profession. Changes in society and particularly the impact that the Internet has on students and their learning have important implications for Thai educators. The question facing teachers is how best to align student learning experiences at school with the rate at which students are becoming independent e-learners after school hours.

Teachers Are From the Past: Students Are on Their Way Into the Future

Awareness of the Internet and the potential of e-learning represents a starting point from which to understand the technical gap between what teachers know and are able to do and the competencies of their students are both significant and expanding. The gap has its roots in differences of life experiences between teachers and students.

The information summarized in the Table 1 helps to shed light upon the life experience differences between primary students and their older teachers. People are a product of their opportunities and experiences and an analysis of when and how they lived can be applied to develop an appreciation of the opinions, values and subsequent behaviors that individuals are likely to have.

Table 1

Brief Summary: Life Experiences of Thai Teachers and Students

	Thai teachers	Thai students
Age	Oldest born during 1940s	Oldest born during 1990's
Society believed	Set body of knowledge	Infinite body of knowledge
World of work	Work with hands	Work with brains
Tools	Manual tools	Technological tools
Time in history	Agricultural age	Conceptual age
Access to education	Higher education for a few	Higher education for many
Occupations	One life career	Many life time careers
Rate of communication	Slow communication	Instant communication
Society	Local village—closed	Global village—open
Language and culture	Thai language and culture	Thai, foreign languages and diversity of culture

Process to Develop the Model

Primary teachers like all teacher groups have their own preconceived ideas based upon their experiences and prior learning opportunities with applications of technology as this relates e-learning. Older teachers

indicated lower confidence levels and willingness to engage in education-related applications of the technical world. For these reason, reluctant primary teachers at the grades four, five and six were identified to be the target group for participation in the study. Readings from the change literature were applied to develop a realistic vision for the intended growth pertaining to areas of teacher adoption levels to implement e-learning. The literature concerning change theory was integrated and applied as a framework to develop an operational mind-set for the model which was revised several times with input from experts in the fields of e-learning, teacher development and primary English program delivery. The objective was to refine the model, so that it would be responsive to a wide range of teacher ICT skill and awareness levels, opinions about e-learning and readiness levels to implement the model. The model acknowledged that not all teachers have equal opportunities to implement e-learning, because they do not have computers or the appropriate Web-based infrastructure resources in their classrooms. The goal to allow teachers to self-assess their initial readiness or adoption levels to implement e-learning was achieved through the development and implementation of the teacher self-assessment rubric. The rubric is simple and clear and is based upon teacher opinions about e-learning, ICT skills, confidence to use a computer to plan and teach and willingness to implement e-learning. These in turn represented the independent variables that were measured to determine the effectiveness of the e-learning as a strategy to teach English model. For the study, teachers were asked to practice using the model as a component of their regular lesson planning and in class instruction and were surveyed at the end of the study to determine changes in their opinions, satisfaction and willingness levels to implement e-learning.

Figure 1. E-learning teacher self-assessment rubric.

A total of 14 teachers from three schools participated in the study. Majority of the teacher (57.2%) indicated improved levels of readiness to implement e-learning which means individual improve one or two

levels on the self-assessment rubric. Approximately, three fifths of teachers indicated that they were unable to practice using the model (35.7%) which means they were unable to apply e-learning into their classroom due to the lack of available infrastructure and less than one tenth of teachers reported that they had overestimated their find time to practice (7.1%).
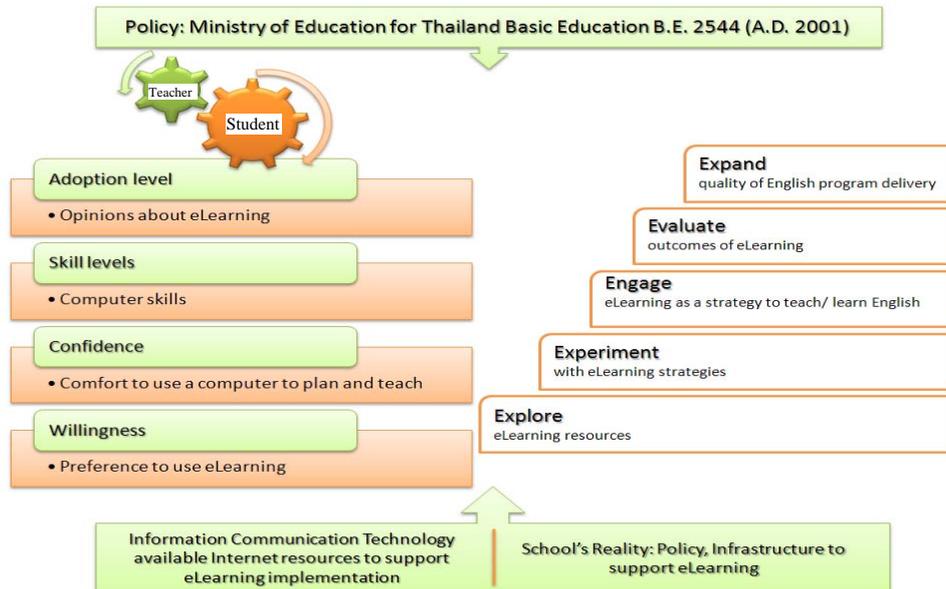

Figure 2. E-learning as a strategy to teach English model findings: Primary English teachers of Grades four, five and six.

Table 2

Summary of Post Study Teacher Self-Assessments

Number of teachers	Improvement	Unable to practice	No change
14	57.2	35.7	7.1

A five-point Liket-scale was applied to questionnaire items where the meanings of the scales were that 5 represented the most effective and 1 represented the least effective ranking of teacher opinion (see Tables 3, 4 and 5).

Table 3

Teachers' Opinions About Using the Online Educational Resources

How easy was it to use the online educational resources?	Mean
To look at and understand	3.57
To design a student activity	3.38
To use in your classroom	3.31
To assign to individual students	3.38

In Table 3, a mean of 3.57 indicated that the ease to which teachers rated their ability to look at and understand the online educations resources as effective. A mean of 3.38 indicated that teachers rated their ability to design a student activity as effective. A mean of 3.31 indicated that teachers rated their ability to use the online educational resources as effective. A mean of 3.38 indicated that teachers rated their ability to assign the online educational resource to individual students as effective.

In Table 4, a mean of 3.46 indicated that teachers rated their satisfaction with the on line application that they chose to use as average in effectiveness. A mean of 3.54 indicated that teachers rated their satisfaction to

apply the content from the Website for part of the lesson as average in effectiveness. A mean of 3.46 indicated that teachers rated their satisfaction to use the Website to support individual student learning as effective.

Table 4

Teachers' Satisfaction with the Online Applications

Usefulness of the online applications	Mean
To produce an activity/work sheet(s) for your students	3.46
To use contents from the website as a part of your English lesson	3.54
To support individual student English learning	3.46

Table 5

Teachers' Opinion About the Effectiveness of E-Learning

Effectiveness of e-learning	Mean
How effective is e-learning to support your teaching of English?	3.62
How helpful is e-learning to support students to learn English?	3.54
How effective was the model to allow you to practice e-learning as a strategy to teach English?	3.54

In Table 5, a mean of 3.62 indicated that teachers rated their satisfaction to use e-learning as a strategy to teach English as most effective. A mean of 3.54 indicated that teachers rated their satisfaction with e-learning to support students to learn English as effective. A mean of 3.54 indicated that teachers rated the effectiveness of the model to allow them to practice e-learning as a strategy to teach English as average in effectiveness.

Discussion

Teachers who participated in the study recognize the potential of the Internet that help them to plan and teach. The question then becomes: Will school leaders support them to be able to change and apply e-learning to improve the quality of their planning and program delivery? Teachers do not have opportunities to change when they must remain married to workbooks and prescribed learning materials that facilitate covering the material. If teachers are to become more student-centered in their program delivery, then they require training and resources. The literature validates the importance of allowing teachers to manage and be accountable for their professional growth. This represents a teacher-centered approach.

The most effective teacher development models focus on experiential learning that occurs on the job and at a rate that reflects the teachers' skills and confidence. To the credit of ICT teachers at the research schools, the study was received with positive enthusiasm. On their own initiative several ICT, teachers initiated solutions to support primary teachers to implement e-learning. One cost effective suggestion was to allow primary teachers more access to the schools' computer labs. The resources to implement e-learning exist at the school level. The issue becomes one concerning the willingness to redeploy these resources. The notion of teacher coaches as a strategy to support less technologically experienced teachers is supported by the literature.

The results from the student questionnaire revealed important findings that have implications for teachers. The findings from an analysis of the technological skill of eight to 12 year olds indicated the necessity for teachers to rethink the expectations that they have for their students. Students view computers and the Internet as a tool that facilitates their learning and as such they are becoming independent e-learning during their after school hours.

Conclusions

The e-learning, as a strategy to teach English model, was proven to be effective, because it was perceived

as being useful and addressed the authentic needs of teachers. The teacher self-assessment (rubric) as a teacher development tool represented a strategy to support teachers and assist their supervisors to better identify areas and degrees of future teacher growth. This is an important feature of the model because teachers want unbiased valid feedback and a degree of autonomy so as to enable them to identify and effectively manage the next steps for their ongoing professional growth. The model has useful applications for school administrators regarding their operational responsibilities to align teacher training and resource allocation within a framework of school based and Ministry of Education policies.

The opinions expressed about the usefulness of e-learning as an English language instructional strategy from teachers were encouraging and pointed to be an important difference of opinions between teachers and their administrators.

As an outcome of pre-study meetings, school administrators were surveyed to identify their opinions about the main obstacles facing teachers to implement e-learning. School administrators said that teacher awareness of Internet resources available to help them represented the single most important obstacle for teachers to overcome (92.3%), followed by teacher willingness to change (84.6%) and ranked teacher access to infrastructure to help them in third place (76.9%). At the conclusion of the teacher practice period, teachers' responses to the post study questionnaire indicated that 85% of the teacher participants were unable to progress beyond level two on the teacher self-assessment (rubric), because they did not have an infrastructure to allow them to integrate e-learning into their classroom. For the majority of the teachers in the study, a lack of access to resources, such as computers, projectors and screens, represented the single most important obstacle to overcome in the e-learning implementation process (85.7%). They were able to express opinions about applications that they had not actually been able to attain as a result of their increased levels of awareness and ability to transfer what they had learned to make intelligent projections about the potential of the Internet to enrich their planning and teaching. This information has important implications for school administrators that both in terms of their perceptions about what teachers need and what teachers actually say are their reality.

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