

On The Socio-Cultural and Context-Based Approach to English Teaching

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Abstract

In this position paper, the author argues for the re-conceptualization of English language teaching (ELT) through the socio-cultural and context-based approach (SCA). For a typical English as a foreign language (EFL) situation, SCA takes as a point of departure a thorough understanding of the macro-level components e.g., local classroom contingencies, a realistic expectation; and micro-level components e.g., sufficient good quality language input, and corrective feedback, all of which should enable local English teachers to feel in charge of their own teaching, unencumbered by western-conceived or guru-led teaching recipes. At the same time, the L2 learner is expected to develop reasonable English proficiency, also unrestrained by false expectations that they would pass for native speakers in their use of English. In short, the SCA approach does not consider the ELT business a zero-sum game. The teacher, the L2 learner, and the whole society should emerge triumphant.

Key words: socio-cultural and context-based approach; classroom contingencies; super-diversity; Global Englishes; reasonable English proficiency

Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) scholars have, over the past several decades, voiced their concerns about problems encumbering ELT success (Brown and Larson-Hall, 2012; Cross, 2010; Lightbown and Spada, 2011; Lin, 2013; Lochland, 2012; Loewen, 2015; Nassaji, 2016; Norris and Ortega, 2001). They have assigned blames to myriad factors, not least of which is the way English has been taught and learned around the globe. For example, Cross (2010) put it that "...an increased awareness of the situated and socially distributed nature of learning has highlighted the need to better understand the complexities of the contexts within which learning takes place..." (p. 434). The complexities accompanying learning contexts cannot be ignored because, as Lochland (2012) put it "there is insensitivity of English language teaching (ELT) methods to the linguistic, socio-cultural, and political background of learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings (p. 261)." Indeed, these challenges should be taken seriously if we are to make progress in ELT.

In this position paper, I argue that ELT in Thailand has also received disparaging remarks because low English proficiency among Thai EFL learners has been repeatedly reported as a chronic problem, thereby putting Thailand today in a precarious position. This is because it has to compete with its neighboring countries to become a more successful Thailand, educationally, economically, politically and socially. Certainly, the paucity of English ability in Thailand is a grave concern. From time to time, those in the Ministry of Education and laypersons alike have lamented that the way English is taught in Thailand has always been inadequate as a result of an



overemphasis on grammar instruction at the expense of communicative use of the language.

ELT theorists and professionals have glorified the value of communicative language teaching (CLT) with an insinuation that grammar should be taking an auxiliary role in learning how to use a second language (Savignon and Wang, 2003; Whong, 2012). However, pointing fingers at grammar does a disservice to teachers and learners alike, for grammar has to be an indispensable component of the language engine. Without grammar one cannot go beyond the very basic use of language. Any experienced English teachers would know that grammar is important for effective use of the language at the advanced level.

The dichotomy in ELT such as grammar or no grammar may not help solve problems of unsuccessful L2 acquisition. Rather, I argue that we consider some external factors that, perhaps, bear direct consequences to ELT—the teaching approach that truly addresses local concerns. Considering the macro aspects of ELT such as the instructional context might be needed e.g., globalization and the concept of super-diversity, Global Englishes, and the interplay of these two elements with ELT. In this light, I propose a consideration of the socio-cultural and context-based approach to ELT, which in my opinion should form the basis of multi-faceted English language instruction.

Granted the aforementioned focus, this paper proceeds as follows. First, I will discuss the notion of super-diversity within the concept of globalization. Next, I will discuss the concept of global Englishes that might impact how English should be taught and learned. Finally, I will discuss the interface between super-diversity, Global Englishes and English language teaching approaches and methods. The discussion may shed light on English language teaching problems in an EFL context such as Thailand.

Super-diversity

A corollary of globalization, super-diversity basically refers to new patterns of migration and hence new ways of communication that define contemporary society (Vertovec, 2007). More specifically, super-diversity is multifaceted, spawning new knowledge in such areas as ethnic and racial studies to mass communication and, not least, to the teaching of foreign languages. As Kramsch (2014) aptly put it,

...what globalization [implying super-diversity] encourages FL [foreign language] educators to do is not to lose sight of the whole even as they are busy teaching testable structures and drawing up the structural progression of course syllabi. Keeping an eye on the whole means catching the essence of a word, an utterance, a gesture, a silence as they occur inside and outside the classroom, and seeing them as a manifestation of a speaker's or a writer's voice, informed by an awareness of the global communicative situation, rather than just by the correct way of constructing sentences, paragraphs, and texts

Kramsch's remarks point to the changing landscape of foreign language as well as English language instruction in today's globalized world. That is, it is incumbent upon English teachers not to take for granted the inherent meanings accompanying English language use by not only the traditional native speakers but also by English language users around the globe. This awareness must be instilled in the minds of the L2 learner of English. In other words, for the L2 learner to appropriately function through the English language, he/she must necessarily remain equipped with both linguistic

and socio-cultural knowledge of language in use. This is because with super-diversity comes a linguistic scenario in which an open-minded, flexible language policy and planning will need to redress “the idea that language diversity itself is a problem, rather than the normal condition of human societies” (Wiley and Garcia, 2016, p. 49). Given this shift in the emergent and dynamic role of foreign languages, English language teachers—native and non-native speakers alike—are being confronted with new challenges and responsibilities. In fact, as Xu (2013) put it, “... this conceptualization of globalization as super-diversity can also be interpreted as the diversity in the needs of the learners, the demands for a variety of teaching pedagogy, e.g., grammar translation, communicative language teaching, bilingual education and immersion, and the diverse ELT materials both for classroom use and extracurricular utilization, e.g., textbooks by different publishers...” (p. 7). The new challenges will be how local English teachers should prepare themselves, pedagogically and linguistically so that they will be able to help the L2 learner to become not only communicatively competent but, perhaps more importantly, socially and culturally sensitive to differences out there.

More specifically, the field of second language acquisition and learning (SLA) needs to expand its traditional focus on the cognitive side of the business to embrace a socio-cultural aspect of L2 acquisition and learning. Zuengler and Miller (2006) proposed that “...the traditional positivist paradigm is no longer the only prominent paradigm in the field: Relativism has become an alternative paradigm” (p. 35).

In sum, super-diversity has led to an increasingly diversified and dynamic spread of English, overcoming the long-entrenched dichotomy prevalent in ELT. Because of super-diversity, there will be no need to distinguish between native and non-native English, for there is only English use by different peoples representing different cultures. Because of super-diversity, the ELT landscape has become a more level-playing field. Moreover, language policy and language assessment might expand their foci to not only standard British or American English but also other varieties of English. Jenkins (2015) proposed that ELT professionals should ask more questions that would challenge the status quo. As she put it,

The methodologies and materials that are promoted remain those favored by the ENL centers, that is communicative approaches with an emphasis on task based language teaching, learner autonomy, and monolingual (English only) textbooks. The teachers who are most highly sought after are still native speakers of English. And the tests that are taken most seriously continue to measure learners' competence in relation to ENL norms. (p. 120).

Simply put, English language policy and assessment should pay more attention to varieties of English used by English language users--native and non-native alike. Flexibility is key as far as super-diversity is concerned. Along with super-diversity in relation to the role of English in today's world is Global Englishes.

Global Englishes

A viable replacement of the World Englishesⁱ concept (Kachru, 1984), Global Englishes is used to characterize emerging roles of the English language that transcend the traditional and restrictive definition of English as belonging to the so-called native speakers—whether they are English or American. That is, Global Englishes reflects “the recent massive growth in the use of English as an international



lingua franca among people from different nations and first languages” (Jenkins, 2015, p. xiii). Global Englishes comprises prominent components as follows: the ownership of English (Higgins, 2003); English as a lingua franca (Baker, 2009); English and technology (Troyer, 2012); accommodation and addressivity strategies (Sergeant et al., 2012).

Global Englishes, like English in the traditional sense, has its own structural patterns, namely the use of a question tag “isn’t it?” in all situations among Indian speakers of English. This kind of linguistic innovation (Cogo and Dewey, 2012) should no longer be subject to the native speaker’s standard English, which requires different forms of question tags relative to the use of the main verb in a preceding clause. Cogo and Dewey further argued that grammatical forms of Global Englishes cannot and should not be deliberated using the native speaker’s single standard because what really matters is how such a form is used in a given speech community or, to be more precise, community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Indeed, it could be argued that Global Englishes is best understood through the concept of community of practice because those various forms of English, albeit distinct from those used by native speakers, “...must be conceptualized right from the beginning as dynamic and capable of continuously rejuvenating themselves” (Fraga-Canadas, 2011, p. 300). In fact, cast in a different light, Global Englishes runs parallel to the notion of “translingualism” (Sugiharto, 2015, p. 125). According to Sugiharto, translingualism defies the deeply-rooted belief held by traditional scholars that “...there is only a uniformly universal and ideal norm that one must conform to” (p. 128) With this defiance the translingual approach emphasizes “...the diversity in practicing language use and the acknowledgement of the evolution of varieties, registers, dialects, and discourses...This approach encourages the pursuit of linguistic heterogeneity and language differences, deeming these differences as resources to be preserved, developed, and utilized” (p. 129).

With Global Englishes becoming all the rage, English teachers are now thrust into a position to make practical decisions about the degree to which they should or should not use Global Englishes in their English classes. On the one hand, it is believed that using Global Englishes to teach English may backfire because most students still hold on to the idea that correct English is either British or American English. On the other hand, more research has been conducted to ascertain the benefits of Global Englishes for the L2 learner. For example, Rajani Na Ayuthaya (2016) asserted that World Englishes should be incorporated into the EFL classroom because Thai students should mitigate their anxiety in using English. This is because “...students will develop a more realistic goal of being efficient English users rather than struggling, and failing, to become like native English speakers. As a result, they will develop self-esteem and more confidence in using their own English...” (p.1). The dilemma notwithstanding, Global Englishes, especially English as a lingua franca (ELF) is emerging as an accurate portrayal of the role of English in contemporary society. According to Ishikawa (2016), ELF “...targets and seeks to comprehend *in situ* English communication across geographical boundaries” (p. 129). We are witnessing professional scenarios where people from diverse linguistic and national backgrounds use their “own” versions of English with one another, oftentimes, with no native English speakers involved. This is another obvious example of super-diversity vis-à-vis English in today’s world.

Some questions that might arise as a result of this super-diversity and Global Englishes are, for example, how English teachers will rise to the occasion? Will they be willing to accept this paradigm shift in the way the English language has been perceived? Will they find an enabling role of Global Englishes in the classroom? All these questions will not be answered satisfactorily by a one-side party, namely the teacher. Perhaps, when teaching English to their students, local English teachers may need to sensitize their students to become cognizant of the existence of Global Englishes and then let them decide whether they would want to embrace it. In fact, it may not be the sole responsibility of the teacher to insist that Global English will be the final answer. To be truthful to the dictum of learner autonomy, the teacher must allow students to sample pieces of Global Englishes and see for themselves if they would want it. In other words, the teacher should not go to extremes—either to incorporate Global Englishes slavishly or to shun it at all costs.

The interface between super-diversity, Global Englishes and English language teaching

The ramifications of super-diversity and Global Englishes can be seen in how English should be taught and learned. Over the past several decades, the major approach to teaching English worldwide has been communicative language teaching (CLT). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), CLT focuses on the integration of grammatical forms, functions and meanings. That is, English should be taught as a means of communication rather than as a linguistic system that is an end in itself, although the latter is significant. CLT is a reaction to previous teaching methods called grammar-translation and audiolingualism. These two methods were widely practiced in the past, albeit with criticism because of their focus on grammatical accuracy at the expense of fluency, hence stifling the L2 learner's communication ability.

According to Savignon (2002) CLT has the following characteristics. First, it focuses on communicative functions of grammar. Second, it is learner-centered and therefore democratic in nature because it offers students choices. Third, the L2 learner engages in meaningful tasks, leading him/her to negotiate for meaning. Simply put, CLT regards the learning experience as a communication opportunity where the L2 learner comes to appreciate how language forms interact with meanings in particular contexts.

It should be noted that although “the popularity of CLT has not diminished in 30 years” (Leung, 2011, p. 547), it has received a fair share of comments. For example, CLT is premised on the English native speaker's ways of communication, implying that speaking effective English means speaking either in the American or British fashion. Further, CLT assumes that most non-native speakers learn English because they want to simply imitate the native speaker at the expense of their own identity. Some researchers believe that CLT does not lend itself readily to particular classroom contexts; there is a mismatch between what CLT assumes the L2 learner should be able to do through English and what the L2 learner wants to achieve. Research abounds that has reported the shortcomings of CLT in many EFL situations. As Canagarajah (2012) put it, “[w]e have an evolving research literature on how this fashionable method is creating tensions for local communities...stories from Argentina, China, Cuba Japan, Korea, Uzbekistan, and the whole Southeast Asia



region” (p. 265). In this regard, Canagarajah called for a serious rethinking of “local pedagogical traditions, their rationale, and their significance” (p. 265).

Given the problems spawned by CLT, although it has been introduced in hopes of helping the L2 learner to become communicatively competent, one can see that the teaching profession is now searching for teaching approaches or methods that would rightly capture the nuanced characteristics of ELT in the era of globalization where super-diversity and Global Englishes are the order of the day. It seems that a fixed method or approach to teaching is incapable of addressing instructional concerns. What is sorely lacking is teaching approaches that allow for a high level of flexibility for both the teacher and the L2 learner to become relatively successful.

The socio-cultural and context-based approach to teaching (SCA)

Because of globalization, especially super-diversity, the advent of Global Englishes, and the insufficiency of CLT to address teaching and learning concerns in many ELT contexts, I argue that an approach to teaching that might tackle instructional concerns could be one that is socio-cultural and context-based. That is, it is of little use to search for the best teaching method or approach, for local classroom contingencies are the point of departure in a quest for better teaching performances. It is no longer appropriate to begin an ELT lesson, religiously adhering to a particular teaching method. Carefully studying the instructional context is a top priority. Then and only then will a teacher begin thinking about appropriate instructional approaches, methods, or techniques. An easy example to this statement is a Thai teacher of English may begin teaching in Thai when it is clear that most students are not yet ready to be taught through English only. A decision as to whether to use only English or the L2 learner's L1 is subsumed within one of the instructional components I discuss below.

As proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2006), any discussion about language teaching methods revolve around the following components: language features (e.g., lexis, grammar, and the meaning system); factors and processes of learning; teaching (e.g., providing good quality language input and sufficient interaction opportunities). While these components are relevant and serve as something tangible for English teachers of all stripes, they have their own shortcomings because they imply that there must be fixed and procedural steps that English teachers must strictly comply with. Any practicing teachers know that lessons do not go as planned and that western-conceived ways of teaching may not deliver. This is because they are subject to a “tissue rejection” situation, where newfangled ideas imported from the outside do not successfully take root in a local terrain. Therefore, it might be interesting to learn more about teaching guidelines or principles that outperform monolithic teaching methods or approaches. Such guidelines or principles could be a socio-cultural and context-based approach (SCA).

The SCA approach to teaching will have as its starting point a realistic expectation of what most students can do at each stage of learning. This realistic expectation is derived from the teacher's informed understanding of extant second language acquisition (SLA) theories e.g., the comprehensible input and output hypotheses, the interaction hypothesis, socio-cultural theories of language learning. For example, the teacher expects students to become functional, not necessarily native-like, in using the language because he/she knows that most EFL students do not have sufficient opportunities to use English. Nor does the teacher expect students to reach the same level of English learning outcomes because of individual

differences in terms of language aptitude and motivation and because not all students need the same level of English proficiency in their future careers. That is, some may need to be good at all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing but others may simply want to be able to listen and read rather than speak and write in English.

The realistic expectation also has to do with the role model. The teacher should instill in the L2 learner that being native-like in language development is not always the ultimate goal of L2 learning, especially in times of Global Englishes and super-diversity. Being an effective user of the language is more realistic. In other words, such dichotomy as sounding like a native or a non-native speaker is irrelevant. The world is now increasingly witnessing diverse users of English--not native or non-native speakers. As Widdowson (2015) cogently argued "[A third reality] is the reality of English as a lingua franca. English as used across Asian and all other contexts in our globalized world, and which reveals quite clearly how users of the language are capable of effective communication without conforming to the norm of English as a native language" (p. 15).

In addition to realistic expectation, the local teacher will provide sufficient good quality language input that does not preclude examples of Global Englishes in hopes that students will develop sensible appreciation of vast differences that do exist beyond the classroom confines. Further, because the development of an additional language necessitates reasonable use on a regular basis, among other things, the teacher will provide opportunities for students to use English both in speech and writing using tasks that are appropriate and a bit challenging. As Loewen (2015) put it, "[c]ommunication does not happen in a vacuum; learners must talk about something, and providing input for communicative activities allows researchers and teachers to affect task interaction" (p. 43). On the surface level, the previous statement seems to be in favor of the long-standing CLT approach I discussed earlier; however, when viewed from the SCA point of view, the term communication as used here necessarily involves communication through various versions of English following the Global Englishes and super-diversity concepts. Indeed, ELT is now in the "plurality" ambience.

Furthermore, because successful use of language should mean both high fluency and accuracy, the teacher will attempt to provide corrective feedback (Li, 2010) on an as-needed basis. I am convinced that in EFL, rather than ESL, contexts students have a strong tendency to make many mistakes and, more importantly, those mistakes must be dealt with in a timely manner; false hopes that students will be able to self-correct their language production mistakes, as might be anticipated in a typical ESL situation, will remain false. Whereas it has been hotly debated in the CLT approach whether or not and when correction should be provided, I argue that in the SCA approach correction is a necessity rather than an option. In fact, corrective feedback, given in the right moment and doses, is a sine qua non feature of ELT in the EFL context, such as Thailand. In order for students to receive corrective feedback, they must be put in a situation where feedback could be provided through interaction with teachers and/or peers. This is important because the SCA approach stresses the importance of "...a learning theory that takes social and ecological interaction as its starting point and develops detailed analyses of patterns of interaction in context. [Therefore] language learning is manifested as participants' progress along trajectories of changing engagement in discursive practices" (Young, 2009, p. 165).

From the foregoing characterization of the socio-cultural and context-based approach (SCA), a tentative model of SCA is proposed below. The model is intended to portray nuanced and interconnected dimensions of the teacher's and the L2 learner's realistic expectations, quality language input, opportunity to use English and corrective feedback, all of which are combined to operate within local classroom contingencies. That is to say, ELT is viewed as operating at the macro (e.g., realistic expectations) and micro (e.g., corrective feedback) levels, taking into serious consideration opportunities and challenges that usually accompany any instructional endeavors. This is important because, according to Crabbe (2003), quality in teaching and learning is comparative in nature, meaning both the teacher and the L2 learner must work together in a proactive manner, so that both parties will become reasonably flexible while engaged in the instructional process. Once flexibility is well in place, the teacher might be placed in a better position to help the L2 learner to develop reasonable English proficiency. As far as ELT in Thailand is concerned, flexibility in teaching, learning and assessing the learning outcomes does not seem to exist in the mindsets of many teachers and learners. In other words, the current ELT in Thailand might compare favorably with a zero-sum game.

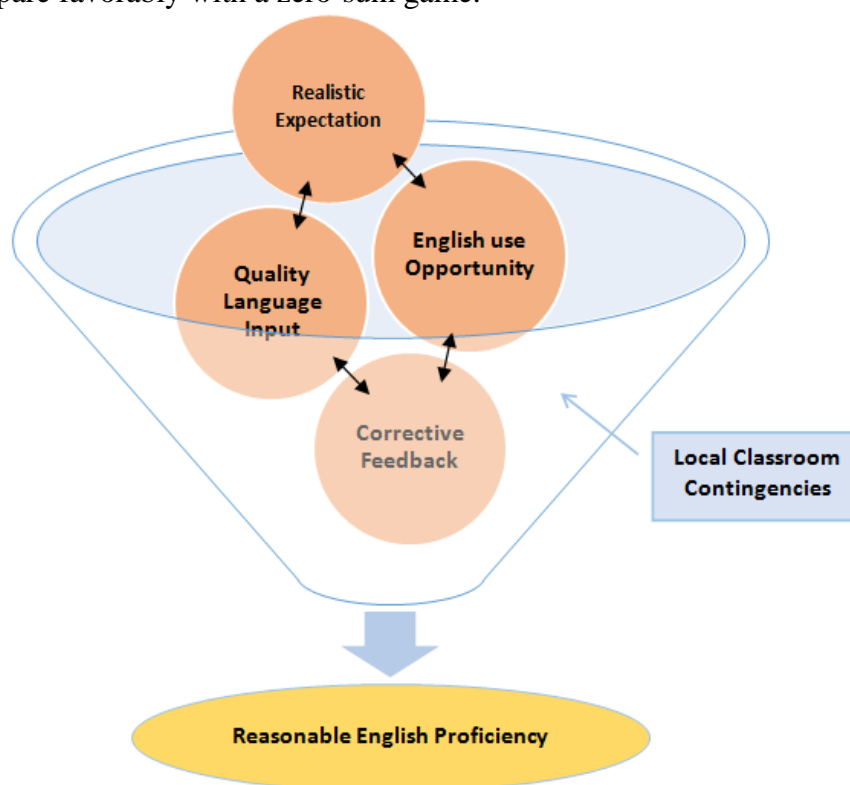


FIG1. A Tentative Model of SCA

Final Remarks

By way of concluding, the socio-cultural and context-based approach (SCA) to teaching English, in all its manifestations, could potentially lead to reasonably desirable levels of English proficiency on the part of the L2 learner in the EFL context. In fact, reasonable English proficiency is the ultimate goal to be achieved by the L2 learner who will decide for themselves exactly at what level of reasonableness he/she wants to reach. In this way, self-defined reasonableness would obviate the unrealistic need imposed by others that the learner should strive towards a native-like repertoire as has been traditionally the case. Moreover, the model's overriding concern

with local classroom contingencies allows for a high level of flexibility as far as the teaching and learning of English is concerned. The teacher and the L2 learner alike are given opportunities to incrementally make great strides in their own teaching and learning efforts. They will not be subject to teaching wisdom gleaned from the western "gurus" as has happened far too frequently in ELT. Rather, they will bear heavier responsibilities in figuring out what is going to be most beneficial to them in a given situation.

In a nutshell, the SCA approach encompasses both linguistic and non-linguistic factors with the latter being prioritized. Such non-linguistic factors as local classroom contingencies and a realistic expectation take precedence over linguistic accuracy narrowly defined as native-like proficiency. The SCA approach does not take the ELT business as a zero-sum game. The teacher, the L2 learner, and the whole society should emerge triumphant.

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¹ World Englishes refers to the geographical and historical aspects of the English language with a view to categorizing speakers of English in the world into three distinct groups: the Inner Circle (referring to native speakers of English); the Outer Circle (referring to those who use English as a second, official language); and the Expanding Circle (referring to those who study English as a school subject, the English language having no official status).



Appendix A

Guidelines for SCA-based reading lessons

In keeping with the tenets of the SCA approach, the following guidelines for the teaching of academic reading could be employed.

Pre-reading stage (classroom contingencies)

The teacher should find out about their students' English proficiency. Let's assume that the class is a lower-intermediate proficiency learner at the university level. Reading passages should be about Thai life and thoughts which might be familiar with all the students. Such passages could be excerpted from local English newspapers. Subsequently, selected difficult vocabulary items should be taught, and the teaching method could be either CLT or traditional such as grammar translation. For example, if the reading contains the following phrase "sowing the seeds of sufficiency economy," then instead of explaining it using English, the teacher can just translate it into Thai "หว่านเมล็ดพันธุ์แห่งเศรษฐกิจพอเพียง" will just save time and help students get the idea right away. Of course, the teacher must also use English when appropriate because students must have the opportunity to use English during class as well.

During-reading stage (realistic expectations, opportunity to use English, quality language input, and corrective feedback)

The teacher may ask students to do pair-or small-group work depending on the number of students. The teacher-fronted teaching style might be as conducive to learning as student-centered teaching. That is, the teacher must be realistic about what is practical for a given teaching situation. The teacher, while teaching the passage, will guide students as to how to find the gist of the passage through Q&A sessions if time permits. Here, students may work individually or collectively to figure out answers. The teacher and students should use as much English as possible; use of English will provide learners with opportunities to receive corrective feedback, which should be given only when necessary.

It should be noted here that while the teacher encourages students to focus on comprehension and the ability to infer meanings from the passage, some less able students may need extra help. In this case, the teacher must be aware of individual learners' problems which tend to vary from one student to another. For example, a few students may struggle very hard trying to understand complex sentences they find in the passage. Therefore, the teacher may need to focus on the grammar involved in such sentences; he/she may even have to go so far as to translate such sentences into Thai, so that the poor students will be able to understand them and catch up with the whole class. At this point, I argue that the teacher should be afraid that he/she will not use the current CLT method because I personally believe that the teacher will have to do whatever it takes to help students learn.



Post-reading stage (English use opportunity, reasonable English proficiency)

At this stage, the teacher provides a follow-up lesson that will allow students more opportunities to be exposed to good quality English language input. This is important because language skills development needs continuity. Exactly what follow-up activities to be provided will be decided from lesson to lesson, depending on the teaching situation. An example of such activities might be for students to write a reflection of the reading passage learned. At the risk of sounding too idealistic, I propose a writing follow-up activity because writing helps students to think on paper and at the same time they will have to opportunity to notice what they can or cannot write--an indication of learning. In fact, writing is very important for student writers will be able to receive clear corrective feedback from the writings assigned.

In conclusion, the tentative guidelines given here are meant to suggest that no fixed teaching approaches or methods should be provided. The teacher must be given opportunity to experiment with various teaching techniques as they see fit. The guidelines discussed above might have some resemblance to CLT principles, but they might be more practical in the sense that the teacher is not expected to strictly adhere to set steps of teaching. In this way, the SCA approach is always a work in progress. The teacher and, to a lesser extent, students will be encouraged to be sensitive to one another and be willing to adjust themselves to the challenges that usually accompany the teaching and learning of English.