Bottom-up Enactments of Overseas Professional Learning and Development by Thai University English Teachers

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Abstract

English language education policy is deployed strategically as an instrument to address wider national policy objectives in most emerging nations. In universities, policy enactment at institutional and classroom levels hinges on the development of a qualified and skilled English teaching workforce. The continued dominance of linear discourses of the relation of learning and practice and reliance on individual teacher agency to achieve policy objectives, however, risk policy failure. This paper reports the 'bottom-up' enactments of teacher professional learning and development (PLD) policy using reflections of three Thai university English teachers who individually

completed PLD in overseas English-dominant settings. We found their connection of learning and practice complicated by institutional factors and conditions and by discourses that underpin language and PLD policy and that privilege imported pedagogies. We suggest that without institutional disengagement with linear models of teacher learning and development, and appropriate institutional support and structural accommodation to negotiate the connection between learning and practice, achievement of policy goals of quality and excellence in English teaching and learning through overseas PLD will remain challenging.

Keywords: Policy enactment, teacher learning, professional development, English language teaching

Introduction

National-level policies in many non-English dominant nations, particularly in the Asian region, embed mandatory English language learning for all students, including English programs for students in universities, and encourage increasing use of English as a medium of instruction across academic programs (Liyanage & Walker, 2019). This is certainly the case at all levels of the education system in Thailand (Todd & Darasawang, 2021), reflective of an "underlying ideology that views English as the language of development and globalization" (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017, p. 28). The professional learning and development (PLD) of quality university English teachers who can prepare graduates for participation in international, professional, and academic domains dominated by English as the lingua franca is thus accorded additional significance for achievement of both institutional outcomes and national policy objectives (Buasuwan, 2018). More specifically, the Thai government has identified English teaching practices in universities as a focus of reform, and teacher PLD as a policy tool to achieve this reform (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017).

Implicit in top-down policy perspectives relying on teachers for implementation of reforms to improve graduates' English proficiency is construction of teaching as a technical activity, and assumption of a linear relation between teacher PLD, changes in practice, and outcomes. However, "policies do not normally tell you what to do" (Ball, 1994); rather, policy reforms are enacted (Braun et al., 2011), as teachers in classrooms choose what to do in unique processes of recursive interactions between new ideas, their personal knowledge and experience, and contextual circumstances (Strom & Viesca, 2020). In this paper, we focus on policy to reform English teaching practices in Thai higher education using reflections of three teachers of English at a Thai university who completed PLD activities in Anglophone settings. However, although we acknowledge the larger political and economic macro-context of this policy and its objectives, we adopt a "micro-level…bottom-up" (Kirkpatrick & Bui, 2016, p. 2) approach of policy-as-practice that acknowledges the complexities of relations among PLD, practice, and context experienced by practitioners to explore the constraints and opportunities for reform in the Thai setting. In the analysis of the teachers' reflections on their experiences of reform in the translation of PLD into their classroom practice, we adapt the approach of Braun et al. (2011). Our discussion of findings is informed by non-linear perspectives on the relation between teacher learning and teacher practice that aim to account for the sociocultural and sociomaterial complexities of that relation in context (Strom & Viesca, 2020). We begin with English language teaching and PLD of university English teachers in the Thai setting.

English in Thailand and university English teachers

Thailand has a history of engagement, albeit uneasy, with the English language that dates from the era of European colonial activity in the Asian region, although the nation was never subjected to colonization. This meant that the status of European languages, including English, has always been that of foreign languages (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). In Thailand, while English is acknowledged

as a necessary means of mediating connections with the global commercial and knowledge economies, it continues to be viewed by many as a language of outsiders, but used by locals for interaction with foreigners or within socioeconomically elite groups (Hayes, 2016). Despite ethnolinguistic diversity and the use of at least 70 minority languages or varieties (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017), the Thai government has promoted the ideology of 'Thainess' (Kaur et al., 2016), including the Thai language, as a form of resistance to the influence of the outside world. English is positioned as both a necessity for global participation and a source of corruption of Thai identity and values (Kaur et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the number of Thai-English bilingual schools and university courses using English as a medium of instruction is increasing, and the social use of English has become something of a middle-class status symbol (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017).

Language education policy is embedded in the Thailand 4.0 policy that prioritizes English language learning in the development of a "knowledge-based economy, with an emphasis on research and development, science and technology, creative thinking, and innovation…[as] many studies have found that countries with a high level of English proficiency tend to have high levels of innovation" (Buasuwan, 2018, pp. 159, 168). This focus on English has taken on a new dimension with Thailand's participation in regional economic integration as an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community (AEC) member. The adoption by the AEC of English as its working language (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017) to expedite AEC relations and free movement of goods, services, and labor refocuses the use of English in regional interaction with other users of English as an additional language, and means that Thais will have to compete for local jobs which require English proficiency (Choomthong, 2014). However, English continues to be considered a foreign language, rather than the regional lingua franca, and is associated with standard Anglophone varieties by both the population at large and many Thai teachers of English (Hayes, 2016), clearly evidenced by the demand for English teachers from Anglophone

nations (Todd & Darasawang, 2021) and the high status such Anglophone teachers continue to be accorded by employers, learners, and local teachers (Floris & Renandya, 2020). This deference to standard varieties is one explanation of the perception of Thais themselves that their English skills are generally poor, but this view is reinforced by various international rankings (open to contestation, see Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017, pp. 35-36) that position Thailand unfavorably both globally and, importantly as far as policymakers are concerned, regionally in relation to other AEC member nations (Kaur et al., 2016).

In higher education, the requirements of national policy objectives of growth and competitiveness (Wichadee, 2012) focusing on the use of English were specifically articulated in 2016 in demands by the Thai Commission of Higher Education that standards of English proficiency in graduates be upgraded (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). Individual institutions were required to develop their own policies to implement compulsory study of English for all students, and to test their English proficiency using a standardized, internationally accepted examination, or an institutionally-owned test that is developed based on accepted standards, as a requirement for degree completion and graduation. The assessment of such language proficiency focuses on the domains of "academic and professional knowledge and a 'working knowledge' of the English language for communication in context" (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017, p. 37), and official documentary evidence of test results is provided to students. English language programs and English teachers are thus positioned as integral to institutional responsibilities, and the Commission policy requires English teaching practices to be revised to meet the demand for improvements in graduate proficiency. Thai university English teachers typically hold a two-year Master's degree in education or teaching English as a foreign language, but some of these programs accept entrants without undergraduate background in either education or English (Todd & Darasawang, 2021). Professional learning and development, as well as changes in practices, are thus arguably key to achievement of both

state and institutional policy goals. Participation in PLD programs, including opportunities at institutions in other countries, has been supported by government funding. In 2018, the Thai government provided 2,096 million baht (67 million US dollars) to support academic staff who attended overseas PLD initiatives (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2018). In these circumstances, an investigation of policy enactment from the 'bottom-up' perspectives of practitioner success in achieving changes/improvements in classroom teaching following PLD participation offers opportunities for assessment of policy-as-practice and identification of any obstacles or impediments to achievement of policy success.

Teacher PLD and policy enactment

Despite attention raised in the literature (e.g., see O'Brien & Jones, 2014) for careful distinctions, the terms professional development and professional learning are frequently conflated or used interchangeably (Taylor, 2020), and "the question of whether the terms are used, understood, or differentiated in practice is a long way from being answered" (O'Brien & Jones, 2014, p. 684). Policymakers, and those evaluating policy implementation, tend to focus on effectiveness and value of PLD in instrumental terms of teacher development as convergence toward a generic "best practice" (Mockler, 2005, p. 734). As Mockler (2020, p. 2) observes, attempts to standardize what constitutes quality in best practice "give rise to some possibilities of practice while limiting others, creating the space within which what counts as 'authentic professional learning' might be enacted." In its crudest form, PLD devalues teachers' experience and resembles imposed training (Sachs, 2000), is often delivered by outsiders with little or limited knowledge of the participants and their work context (Taylor, 2020), and aims to equip teachers as technicians to deliver generic knowledge, using formulaic approaches without acknowledging teacher autonomy and reflection. Such "spray-on" (Mockler, 2005, p. 738) approaches can entrench distorted perceptions of the possibilities of teaching and what it means to be a teacher. A more sanguine model of policy and institutionally

sanctioned PLD employs discourses of a practitioner-focused professional learning model that, according to Sachs (2016, p. 420), is "transformative in its intent and practice," but the underlying rationale still positions teachers as mediators and focuses on achieving instrumental goals. Effective PLD is still ultimately judged in ways that too often neglect an intrinsic value in learning by teachers, inadequately acknowledge the importance of participation in learning, both for its own sake and in the process of learning as an indispensable dimension of understanding teaching. O'Brien and Jones (2014, p. 684) identify a "significant difference between the systematic career progression associated with professional development and the broader, more critically reflective and less performative approach to professional learning," but resolve the dilemma by endorsing the (widely-used) term, (continuing) professional learning and development, which is a practice we adopt here, that is, accepting the premise that professional development activities aim to promote continuing professional learning (Hayes, 2019).

Education researchers are increasingly interested in overseas learning experiences of teachers, although the research literature on overseas or international PLD experiences of teachers is predominantly focused on international pre-service practicums, and the flow of participants in studies set in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia regions, with few exceptions (e.g., Moorhouse & Harfitt, 2019), tends to be the reverse of our study—that is, having participants originating from English-dominant settings (Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013). Some studies report on specific overseas PLD programs, undertaken in universities in destinations such as Australia or Canada, designed to support enactment of education reform by cohorts of practicing school-based teachers from emerging Asian nations (e.g., Allen et al., 2018), including some groups of English language teachers (e.g., Fleming, 2020). However, investigations from a "situated multiplicity" (Strom & Viesca, 2020) perspective of formal overseas PLD experiences completed by practicing English language teachers in higher education of the kind

experienced by our participants—that is, institutionally supported and sponsored as part of policy reforms, but selected and completed on an individual basis—appear to be a neglected area in the research literature.

The focus of this study is not on specific PLD activities or programs, but on individual PLD experiences as embedded in complex institutional teaching environments (Cameron et al., 2013) oriented to policy-driven reform. Specifically, we investigated the question: "How do the experiences of Thai university English teachers, enacting change to classroom practices following overseas PLD, inform implementation of policy to reform ELT?" The importance Thai policies accord to the development of English proficiency for the advancement of higher education is widespread in emerging nations across the region and other parts of the world, and this investigation of practitioner policy enactment, using reflections of Thai university English teachers who have participated in a program of institutionally sanctioned and funded overseas PLD, is valuable for policymakers and institutions, as well as for researchers interested in teacher PLD and policy enactment.

Method

Post-participation reflections of three English language teachers (hereafter, P1, P2, and P3) with four to six years of teaching experience at the university level formed the case for the study (see Table 1).

Table 1
Participant details

Participant	Teaching discipline	HE teaching experience	PLD destination	PLD program and duration
P1	TESOL	6 years	USA	8-week intensive English language course
P2	TESOL	4 years	New Zealand	7-day intensive workshops – TESOL

Participant	Teaching discipline	HE teaching experience	PLD destination	PLD program and duration
P3	TESOL; English for academic purposes	6 years	USA	methodology and principles 2-semester postgraduate courses – TESOL methodology and principles

All participants are employed by a publicly funded university in northeastern Thailand, hereafter Northeast University. It is a university policy to provide financial support and the necessary leave from teaching duties to enable all academic staff—on a rotation basis—to participate in PLD in overseas settings, as P1 explained:

> It's part of the university support, so we are allotted with a certain amount of budget to go over for the training overseas. That has been the policy, and we are taking turns with the queue system for every professor in our office to go and take a chance to do the professional development. (P1: 40-43)

The length, nature, and organizational details of such PLD vary, as participants are given the freedom to identify a program that aligns with their self-identified needs. Also, in some instances, PLD is undertaken in conjunction with the support of visiting scholar schemes or international programs, such as the US government-sponsored Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program. Participants in this study each completed a language-teaching-related PLD activity (one week to nine months) at a university in the US or New Zealand. P1's program involved one semester of observation of English teachers at the destination university, as well as completion of an English course as a learner. P2 completed a week-long intensive program on teaching methodology; P3 completed two semester-long courses of formal teacher education coursework and concurrently taught courses in the Thai language. Although such diverse PLD experiences and the unique qualities of the three participants'

histories and classroom experiences could be approached as three individual cases, we consider all three collectively as a case representative of an important element of Northeast University's response to policy requirements to revise and improve English language teaching practices. All approved ethical protocols were strictly observed. Participants were interviewed within three to six months of their return, using semi-structured interviews to elicit information about their attitudes toward PLD, their intention for attending their specific programs, and their classroom experiences following their return. Interviews lasted 40 to 60 minutes and were conducted in English. Although the use of English rather than Thai presented a possible limitation to the potential richness of the data, the three participants agreed to use English and exhibited no hesitations in expressing their responses, suggesting that they experienced no constraints on conveying the desired meanings. By conducting the interviews in English, methodological issues associated with translation of interview data were avoided. Transcriptions of the interviews were confirmed by the participants as accurate representations of their responses, but as is evident in the data included in this paper, there were some divergences from the structures of Standard English. To preserve the intended meanings of the participants, no attempt was made to 'standardize' the transcripts, and the data included reflect this decision.

The data analysis was conducted by the authors, three of whom practice as university English language teachers in Thailand, and interpretation and discussion of the findings were additionally informed by their experiences of and insight into the context of the study. Selective coding (Clarke, 2005) was used to identify themes and patterns that emerged. The initial codes were then grouped under four interconnected and reflexively interrelated contextual dimensions of education policy enactment adapted from Braun et al. (2011, p. 588):

- Professional contexts (such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, and 'policy management');

- Situated contexts (such as locale, institutional histories, and settings);
- Material contexts (such as staffing, budget, buildings, technology, and infrastructure); and
- External contexts (such as pressures and expectations from broader policy contexts and discursive contexts).

In the discussion that follows, interpretation of findings from the analysis draws on our understanding of policy enactment as situated, in this case, in the relation between teacher learning as integral to changes in teacher practice and the aforementioned four contextual dimensions, informed by views of teacher learning and teacher practice as "entangled" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 7) recursive processes. Contemporary models of teacher learning that conceptualize teaching/learning as a collectively-achieved activity—characterized by the differences in, and mediated by the multiplicity of, unique and dynamic factors (Strom & Viesca, 2020)—align well with the four contextual dimensions of education policy enactment.

Findings and Discussion

The individual experiences of our three participants as they worked to translate their learning into achieving improvements in practice were unique. However, situating these experiences in the four contextual dimensions of policy enactment and their interaction allowed for identification of important aspects of the relations between teacher PLD, teacher practice, and the policy goal of improved English language teaching. Teacher professionalism was central to success in revising or refining practices, and any transformation of the contexts of policy enactment, as well as differing professional responses of the participants to the dimensions of such contexts, would also shape the translation of teacher learning. We present these findings using the four contextual dimensions as organizers of our discussion of the implications for teacher learning and practice, leading to the conclusion that reliance on bottom-up policy enactment, through the

provision of PLD to practitioners, to achieve policy objectives requires re-consideration.

Professional contexts
Participants' attitudes and commitment to reform/policy

It could be observed that the professional goals of our participants aligned with policy objectives of improvements in the quality of English teaching. However, rather than simply adhering to policy prescriptions in a kind of externally driven "organizational professionalism" (Mockler, 2020, p. 3), they were arguably motivated equally by an internal ethical professionalism (Codd, 2005), or a determination to uphold the trust placed in them to develop their practice as effective teachers to best accommodate the needs of their students, as articulated by P1 (89-90), '*[I]t is important for us to find the way to develop ourselves, and I love my job.*' All three participants prioritized ongoing participation in formal PLD as '*a must*' (P1, 15) to ensure the quality and currency of their teaching practice, and all identified aspects of their knowledge or skills targeted for development or acquisition through past or future PLD. Although they were '*encouraged by the institute to choose the program that is beneficial for our instruction as a teacher*' (P1, 77-78), they were afforded the freedom to select programs that addressed self-identified needs so that '*we decide basically*' (P1, 77). We can identify evidence in the participants' responses of policy and institutional discourses that presented PLD as a mechanism for '*getting better in the job and increase the performance*' (P1, 10-11), but the independence granted to them encouraged a more personal ownership of their PLD as, according to one participant, '*something that helps me grow in my field of work professionally and also mentally as well*' (P3, 18-19). In P2's reflections, there was a clear conception of teachers' professional growth, as opposed to that of a simple goal of linear outcomes, as the benefits of PLD:

> Professional development should help us know more about ourselves and know what we are good at…what we don't understand about ourselves or give us to sort of light, tell us

up about you know what you are doing and you have to see some other things and look around the context that you're working with. Not only you're good at doing something, but also you have to empathy, appreciate with some other things and totally understand the different contexts from different students' background. (P2: 185-191)

While there was no explicit focus on measurable outcomes, P2's reference to empathy and understanding of students' background illustrated how "personal fulfilment is seldom mentioned without referring to reciprocal benefits for students and colleagues" (Taylor, 2020, p. 11).

From the perspective of individual professionalism, successful PLD generally relies on teachers being prepared to "actively seek out opportunities to enhance their professional practice in ways that are personally meaningful to them" (Hayes, 2019, p. 156), and the three English teachers in this study clearly possessed these qualities of professionalism and commitment to the improvement of practice that was necessary for the enactment of changes in the quality of English teaching in Thai universities as envisaged by policymakers. The teachers exhibited the vital precondition of reflection (Hayes, 2019) and were ready to learn in order to revise and refine their practice: '*I still want to know a lot about teaching methodology and techniques. I still see myself lacking some of that knowledge…I still feel that there are many things in teaching field that I really want to explore…*' (P3, 282-286). Given the opportunities and the necessary advantageous contextual circumstances, these teachers' personal independent professionalism and agency were considered the qualities that could facilitate a satisfactory alignment of bottom-up policy enactment with the objectives of top-down state and institutional policymakers.

Institutional policies and structures

Northeast University had in place a PLD policy that supported teachers' participation in PLD programs offered by universities in overseas destinations. Also, as noted above, within a broad requirement that PLD related to teaching practice, there was a degree

of autonomy that allowed teachers to match their formal PLD with their individual needs. This bottom-up approach to implementation of a top-down policy, and the affordance of extended periods of participation of the kind enjoyed by two of our participants, accorded with studies of effective teacher learning, which indicated that allowing teachers to shape and drive their own learning (Mockler, 2020), especially through completion of qualifications programs or individual (and collaborative) research projects (Hayes, 2019), was not only preferred by teachers, but also had the greatest impact on transforming classroom practices.

What was missing from the PLD policy, according to our participants, was provision for structures and formal processes to support learning in and as practice following participation in PLD and to facilitate broader institutional impact on teaching practices through sharing of adjustments or innovations. The experiences of our participants suggested an institutional context in which teachers enjoyed some professional autonomy, not only in the selection of PLD, but also in the delivery of the prescribed curriculum: '*[T]he privilege is on every teacher creates activity to make something new happen, so we also encourage teachers to do that. Find their own ways…*' (P1, 96-198). However, if institutionally sponsored PLD, envisaged to improve English teaching, is to be translated into classroom practice, there needs to be accompanying institutional acknowledgement and accommodation of the "entangled" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 7) nature of learning and practice and of the contextual complexity in which attempts to improve classroom practice are enacted. It appears that teacher autonomy involves assumption on the part of the institution of a linear relation between teacher learning and practice, and that by following PLD "the teacher has full agency to take her [*sic*] learning and drop it, intact, into the classroom" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 1). While our participants understood that '*not everything can use directly. We need refinement. We need accommodation in order to make what we planned fit to the level and interest of the students. Teachers need to be flexible…*' (P1, 239-240), the translation of learning into practice, and the continued learning through this

process, appeared to rely at the institutional level on individual teacher's agency. Success in this process, however, was significantly constrained by various contextual circumstances that, as evident in the participants' reflections, appeared not to have been considered by policymakers as requiring their attention to more fully afford the benefits of PLD to achieve improvements in practice.

One such contextual circumstance was the absence of formal institutional processes and structures to promote and support reflection on PLD learning, and translation of such learning into practice, or to develop learning communities. For instance, there was no requirement to report on or evaluate PLD experiences. The institution conducted student evaluations of teaching after the completion of semester programs, but mechanisms to build professional learning communities, such as peer observations or collaborative action research drawing on student responses, would provide a more productive environment to reflect collectively on particular teaching approaches or techniques. Our participants, on the other hand, independently reflected on their day-to-day and moment-to-moment teaching in practice and on their overall success by, for example, conducting '*my own evaluation which is just write what the students get from my class, and then what they like, what they don't like*' (P3, 159-162). However, any dissemination of knowledge, insights, or new approaches or techniques, including PLD experiences, among colleagues occurred informally and on an *ad hoc* basis:

> Well, we share in our monthly meeting, but…we wouldn't say I learned this, learned…as revealed in the data…that, but I…maybe when we ask some questions to our colleagues, or we share about our students' opinions, or their attitudes or whatever…we share just for fun, and sometimes for serious case as well, but it helps. It's not that formal way. (P2: 246-253)

The participants and their colleagues recognized the value of collegial and collaborative learning, and '*we have a conversation about that to form some kind of workshop from the staff that got the*

scholarships, but if we have something to share, we just do that' (P3, 196-198). However, top-down intentions of the institution to develop cohesive professional learning communities as a strategic element of PLD policy seemed to be lacking, and bottom-up intentions of the teachers, as revealed in the data, faced structural obstacles, such as the full teaching timetables of full-time teachers and the large number of part-time teachers which made it '*very difficult to gather everyone because we…I think now we have 30 or 40 part-time lecturers, and we teach different time, different days'* (P3: 200-202).

Like English teachers in many Thai universities who experience structural conditions of teaching and administrative workloads (Kiatkheeree, 2016), the professional commitment of our participants to plan and create innovations in program content based on PLD learning was stymied by heavy teaching schedules leading to challenges in finding the necessary time. As P2 explained, some intentions prompted by PLD experiences to innovate and to be the kind of teacher they had imagined remained a 'dream' due to unfavourable workplace conditions:

> I have a lot to do in one day, so sometimes even I could imagine of myself working on producing or creating a new material in my class, but eventually I always ended up with something really simple, to be honest. That's what I was dreaming about…But it was about timing, so I decided to use something old from last year, something I really got used to using that and re-use it again for this year students. It's kind of unfair for them, but I still wish I can have more time to adjust that for our students. (P2: 118-126)

Our participants reflected on their efforts to introduce new ideas and techniques in their classrooms and to make adjustments in response to contextual circumstances, but they also voiced, both explicitly and implicitly, the linear discourses of learning and practice that idealized PLD learning, particularly when experienced overseas in English-dominant settings. They constructed what we conceptualize as the integration of learning in and of practice in

response to the context as a dilution or a compromise of the 'best' practice they had learned about during PLD. In summary, the professional context in which our participants learned and practiced was one which failed to fully support their individual professionalism. To support teachers' desires to improve pedagogy and student learning, and in so doing to achieve the policy objectives, the university should not assume that facilitation of participation in PLD is all that is necessary for the professionalism and agency of teachers to take shape and hence bring about change. A more comprehensive approach is needed that rejects the linear models of learning-practice processes and provides a professional context for policy enactment through PLD—one that favors teacher learning in translation of ideas into classroom teaching and in transformation of learning in and through practice.

Situated contexts

From both top-down and bottom-up perspectives, abstract policy objectives formulated for reform at national or system-wide levels are enacted in situations that reflect local circumstances and the responsive interactions of unique individuals. If PLD programs that aim to improve teaching practice are planned in response to local situations, translation of teacher learning into classroom practice may be more straightforward than in the cases of our participants who completed PLD overseas. The value of opportunities to learn current approaches and techniques in English language teaching in English-dominant settings, often grounded in research conducted in such settings, can only be realized through the transfer or translation of learning into local, often very different, situations. Our participants recognized this necessity, as well as the need to '*have to really adjust a lot when I had to apply to my classroom*' (P1, 100) in response to a key element of the local situation—their students. However, their reflections revealed once again that policy to improve English language teaching practices through PLD programs for teachers could not rely on linear assumptions that teachers had unmitigated agency to improve practice. Indeed, institutions and policymakers need to

address situational circumstances in ways that support teachers to respond to local contexts, make appropriate adjustments, and encourage a professional context based on an understanding of processes of ongoing learning in and through practice.

Students

Our participants were cognizant of the role of situated contexts in the enactment of new ideas and, during their PLD experiences, began making judgments on how their learning could relate to their classroom situations and students. For example, P2 '*picked up a lot of strategies and ideas, … at that time, I feel like this type of class or this style of teaching and learning is suitable for my context*' (P2, 99-105). Nevertheless, not all of PLD content was considered useful, although this was nuanced, as some judgements were based on suitability for differing levels of student language proficiency. However, any assumptions by institutions, or practitioners, that overseas PLD would directly lead to introduction of classroom practices that mirror current international trends in English teaching are misplaced and, as our participants' reflections confirmed, ignorant of the complexity of classroom learning in which the agency of students has an important role.

In some instances, commitment to the introduction of new approaches, techniques, or activities required persistence with practices that encountered student resistance and resulted in varying outcomes. For example, P3 returned from overseas PLD determined to use English as the medium of classroom instruction, employed a variety of strategies to support students who struggled, and succeeded in developing a more communicative classroom in which students were more willing to use the target language:

> After coming back from the program, I tended to use English
> a lot, almost 100% in class. That's one struggle because the
> students just why you didn't speak Thai to me. You were
> Thai. Especially, when I explained really complicated
> instruction, what they need to do. Sometimes they confused,
> so I used the visual aids a lot, PowerPoint…We used Google

Classroom, so whenever I used the materials in class, I also upload those to Google Classroom as well. I think I see the positive doing that actually because at first, they struggle. They didn't have anything to say back to me. They just kept silence…But when time passed, maybe about a month, I can see some changes. They just…they have more feedback and more participation. They were willing to give their opinions in English. (P3: 210-221)

In contrast, however, there was also evidence of persistence with activities without any adaptation despite repeated experience of difficulties with engaging students. This failure to acknowledge and respond to the agency of students as partners in learning meant PLD was counter-productive in both improvement of teaching practices and student learning.

When I tried to implement this activity that I learned from the program, sometimes it doesn't really match with the context of the students. For example, in one of the lessons, it talks about refugee…but in Thailand, students don't really have broad knowledge about refugee situation, so the discussion was less fruitful, I think. Some of them tried, especially in one section, I taught students from Faculty of Laws. The discussion from students in that particular section was really fruitful and informative since it was something that they had to learn, or it was in their interest. (P3: 226-236)

Two points have emerged with regard to the agency of students as an aspect of situated contexts in bottom-up enactment of reforms of teaching practice. First, the participants' recounts of their experiences illustrated the complex inter-relations between contextual dimensions. This could be explained that shortcomings in provision of a supportive professional context isolate individuals attempting to change or improve practice as they navigate the tensions between demands of the local situation and powerful dominant discourses that position imported teaching practices as emblematic of professionalism in English language teaching. Policy objectives aside, overseas PLD experiences reinforce the perceived superiority of such

practices and, arguably, due to institutional facilitation of and support for overseas PLD, an obligation to introduce them in as 'pure' a form as possible in local classrooms. Second, it is vital that teachers understand the nature and processes of teacher learning. Familiarity with the complexities of student learning needs to be complemented by a similar understanding of their own learning, based not on a linear process-product model but on a complex relationship between learning and practice (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Strom & Viesca, 2020). PLD programs need to include both formal learning and collaborative structures to prepare and support teachers for situations that require them to balance the reform of teaching practice with the particularities of local situations, to promote productive student learning, as well as validate this process as both learning and practice.

Working conditions

Other aspects of the Northeast University's situated context were found to be significant in the enactment of PLD in the participants' classroom practices. Large classes constrained introduction of teaching approaches, techniques, and activities that were experienced or recommended during overseas PLD. For example, it was challenging for teachers to effectively monitor group work because '*the problem with my class is that we have 40 students, but in Hawaii they have only 20. It's that [sic] double size compared to the one I had [in] Hawaii. This is quite normal here...*' (P1, 261-262). Although teachers had freedom to make some choices about the teaching approach they took, or the activities they used, they

> don't really have the control over the course because we have the course coordinator who designs everything. We just teach according to the lesson plan...the coordinator kind of like open the space for each section for the teachers to implement any activities... (P3: 137-139, 146-148)

The difficulties of establishing an inclusive and collaborative professional learning community when teachers had little available

time and when a significant number of teachers were employed part-time have been noted earlier. Such aspects of the situated context were within the control of Northeast University, but reform of program structures and employment conditions were subject to administrative and financial limitations. Nonetheless, instead of depending on teachers to individually bring about changes in practice without acknowledging the influence of the situated context, a comprehensive PLD program needs to interrogate existing structural conditions. There needs to be consideration of how these might constrain the positive outcomes of a program that promotes participation in formal PLD and of practical measures that can be put in place to support teachers if formal PLD is to be translated into improvements in teaching.

Material contexts

The three participants offered differing perspectives of the influence and role of material contexts on attempts to improve teaching practice. All teachers were required to use a prescribed textbook but were free to introduce their own materials in support of their teaching activities. Physical and technological resources were regarded by P1 as an impediment to improved teaching, with crowded classroom—'*we only have 10 rooms for 6,000-12,000 students*' (P1, 310-311)—and frequently malfunctioned equipment—'*after 10 years, everything is broken. And it's broken at the same time like air-conditioners, overhead projectors, and everything they're broken at the same time...*' (P1, 292-294). Nonetheless, while P1 complained that '*it's ridiculous that in the classroom we don't have even a projector. It's that one of the things we need to support...But we need projector. That's it. That's a support, technical support...*' (P1, 296-298), P3 explained how the introduction of technology in learning that was a feature of PLD had been successfully translated into the classroom:

> I tried to use the technology, the application, web sites that I learned from the program and the orientation to use in class...I used the visual aids a lot, PowerPoint, and as I have the channel to communicate with them. We used Google

Classroom, so whenever I used the materials in class, I also upload those to Google Classroom as well. (P3, 139-144, 210-221)

The above two comments on the material context, while contradictory, confirmed the importance that practitioners attribute to the resources available in the teaching and learning conditions as a means to introduce innovations to improve teaching practice. Given that overseas PLD is predominantly undertaken in educational settings that are materially well-resourced, with access to the latest technology and online teaching resources, if teachers lack these affordances in the local context, the translation of teacher learning into classroom practice would require, at best, personal versatility and adaptability, but would conceivably incur much teacher frustration due to the inability to make use of PLD learning. While our participants offered differing responses, material disparities between local and overseas contexts of teaching need to be considered by institutional policymakers when considering the place of overseas experiences in PLD programs, and if this type of teacher PLD experience is to be promoted as a mechanism for improving English teaching, priorities must include attention to provision of material infrastructure that supports effective teaching.

External contexts

Efforts to improve English language teaching in Thailand are informed by some powerful discourses evident in top-down policy measures and bottom-up practitioner views. Such discourses are not always in accord, are not always productive in terms of classroom practice, and are complicated by the value accorded to overseas PLD. Foregrounding dominant discourses in this way could offer insights into the nature of the issues that teachers encounter in the translation of PLD learning as well as into teachers' attitudes toward the adaptations and modifications that characterize the enactment in classrooms. Findings pointed to two discourses as significant in navigating the relations between promotion of and preference for PLD in Anglophone settings and subsequent practice.

'Native speaker' models and standard English(es)

While the national policy orientation in English language use has turned to regional priorities of Thailand's participation in the AEC—that is, the use of the language with other users of English as an additional language, the "educated native speaker" model (Todd & Darasawang, 2021, p. 199) continues to dominate Thai education. Preference for this model is reinforced by policy contradictions that base testing on the norms of standard varieties (Hayes, 2016) rather than on the English/es used locally/regionally and position English in education as a foreign language rather than a local/regional language. (Todd & Darasawang, 2021).

This preference encourages teachers to place high priority and values on attending PLD in English-dominant settings so as to cultivate their own proficiency as judged by the native-speaker norms (Hayes, 2016), because '*obviously if we go to the country where native speakers are, it should provide us more opportunity to speak and continue our English all the time…*' (P2, 213-214). Participating in PLD in English-dominant settings perpetuates the practice of proficiency self-assessment against the norms of a standard variety, which can then reinforce teachers' expectations of students in the local classroom, which are in turn used to guide and judge improvements in practice. In this study, the participants perceived any discrepancy between their proficiency and the standard varieties as problematic, for example, leading P1 to the conclusion that '*I think I still need more language development, though, somewhere, somehow…*' (P1, 106-107). As P2's comments illustrate, our participants perceived their proficiency, which was undoubtedly acceptable locally/regionally, as inadequate and a source of embarrassment:

> Because we are Thai, we are non-native speakers…to talk or to reply to native lecturer, I wouldn't say I didn't feel embarrassed or had any embarrassment. Sometimes the difficulty or the language barrier made me feel nervous and had some anxiety… (P2: 90-97)

As Baker and Jarunthawatchai (2017, p. 40) point out, "Thais are most likely to be using English with other non-native speakers, so adherence to standard English in terms of Anglophone models are not of relevance." Clearly, teacher PLD in settings where standard varieties are the norm reinforces idealization of the 'native speaker' as the goal of English language teaching/learning.

Imported pedagogies

As noted earlier, imported communicative and task-based language pedagogies have been promoted in Thai education in conjunction with a reform that focuses on student-centered learning. Overseas PLD in Anglophone universities extends this focus on imported teaching practices, which are seen as 'state-of-the-art' and perceived as the pathway to improvement of English teaching. All participants in this study explicitly associated improvements in practice with communicative approaches to teaching: '*[W]hat I learn during my observation to the program is that it's the methodology to involve each student to the conversation, make a classroom more communicative…I can turn my class now to the more communicative setting…*' (P1, 125-131). They returned committed to transforming the dynamics of their classrooms from having teachers solely transmitting language knowledge to focusing on learning through language use (although in P2's comments below, the teacher was still positioned as a model of 'proper' language use):

> I feel like when you learn language, you should move, you should talk, you should have participation with your friends or your classmates many times, not just sometimes, not only listening to your teacher like how to use that language properly, but also you have to produce particular language to the class as well. (P2: 99-109)

Despite some successes in encouraging communicative activity in classrooms, problems were also evident in the participants' accounts of their experiences, suggesting that, as has been argued by Baker and Jarunthawatchai (2017), serious questions remain over whether generic communicative approaches are appropriate for the

Thai setting. The primacy accorded to imported teaching practices can make teachers reluctant to modify or adapt such practices, and, without practical concessions to the agency of students in the learning process, to put the teaching approach ahead of negotiation of the learning approach with students. P1, for example, saw the students as the problem:

> But the problem can be on the student side somehow like what I just told you about those are resisting. They don't accept. I have one of student feedback. He's an engineering student. That class was quite hard to manage because they didn't participate…that guy wrote in his feedback saying that…I preferred just to sit and listen to what teacher said. That's my way of learning. I think I learn best this way, but I don't want to interact with people. I don't see the importance of doing that. (P1: 216-225)

In some instances, the approach that teachers were determined to use was observed during PLD and was associated with current trends in practice internationally, but such an approach was not necessarily appropriate to the Thai setting. For example, both P1 and P3 returned with the goal of using English as the sole medium of instruction. They had observed this practice in English classes in an Anglophone setting, but failed to account for the fact that learners in English classes in these settings generally had linguistically diverse backgrounds and did not often share a language (apart from English) with their teachers. Also, in such setting, there was a widespread use of the target language outside the classroom, where the language was often essential for communicative purposes. Still, current thinking suggests that judicious use of a balanced mixture of first and target languages can support effective learning, and although the participants felt they achieved some success with the English-only approach, teaching arguably could have been more effective with the balanced approach. P3 explained, '*[A]fter coming back from the program, I tended to use English a lot, almost 100% in class…*' (P3, 210), but P1 conceded that the approach was counterproductive for

some students who '*complained at first. Some of them withdraw from the class…*' (P1, 165-166).

Unless overseas PLD is developed to focus on a specific local situation and on the particular needs of teachers and learners, it would continue to reinforce the entrenched perceptions of the desirability and superiority of the native-speaker model and of the esteem accorded to generic imported pedagogical approaches as the key to improved teaching practice. As a mechanism for improving teaching practice, when the ultimate priority of English use is in the domain of communication among AEC members, preference for PLD in Anglophone countries presents a policy dilemma—one that involves deep-seated attitudes that need to be addressed if teachers are to focus their enactment of policy on the improvement in practice so as to equip Thais with the optimum English proficiency to participate in regional activities.

Conclusion

The PLD policy of Northeast University aims to implement Thailand's policy to improve English language teaching practices using the strategies that teachers learn during their overseas PLD. This institutional policy recognizes the importance of ensuring that teaching staff engage in continued learning, provides conditions that encourage teachers to identify their developmental needs or interests, and supports participation in overseas PLD that exposes teachers to stimulating learning experiences and current thinking and practice in their field. However, bottom-up investigation of policy enactment by three university English teachers suggests significant policy issues for consideration. Despite the small participant numbers, our findings are based on their diverse experiences which indicate linear thinking, relying on assumptions that the professionalism and agency of teachers provided with PLD will lead to the achievement of policy objectives of improved English teaching practice, yet such assumptions do not account for the contextual complexity of teacher learning and practice. Teachers are prepared to learn and innovate, but this task is made additionally challenging without a supportive

professional culture with processes and structures that assist teachers to help one another negotiate change. It would be most advantageous for continuous learning at institutional, collective, and individual levels if there are explicit conversations about knowledge, beliefs, practices, and experiences as well as how these can recursively change and transform the orientations to learning of institutions and individuals. What we have learned from our participants is that the discursive context of their learning-practice can distort an understanding of the process and constrain opportunities for productive learning following formal overseas PLD. The participants interacted with students and teaching conditions in a variety of ways, from engagement in negotiation of teaching-learning as a constantly changing collective activity emerging from agency of the various actors and conditions, to attempts at direct implementation that ignored the agency of students and the influence of local conditions. As evident in their responses, some participants realized this, but they also clung to the idea that they should be able to 'implement' approaches and techniques that they experienced as part of PLD as a standard practice, and this artificial separation of practice and theory "hinders teachers as they engage in the complex, relational work required to enact progressive practices" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 9).

What is necessary in the particular situation reported in this paper is metacognitive in nature, in that more attention should be devoted to teachers learning more about teacher professional development as well as about learning itself, so that binary conceptions of learning/theory and practice would be supplanted by approaches which acknowledge that the value of formal PLD lies in ensuring that any learning is continuous, recursive, and situated in practice. Moreover, policymakers need to recognize and accommodate an understanding of the interaction among the various contextual dimensions and the collaborative nature of both teacher and classroom learning—that such interaction is not a simple linear relationship, which attributes individual teachers with absolute agency to engineer change, but a complex dynamic involving agentic

participants. At the bottom-up level, policy is not implemented but translated into the local situation and enacted in context (Braun et al., 2011).

As well as addressing to the more immediate dimensions of context, policymakers and teachers alike need to adopt a critical approach to interrogate their conceptions about English and how best to teach it. For teachers in nations pursuing development, the risk of completing formal PLD in Anglophone settings is the inclination to replicate Anglophone ways of teaching practice, when instead PLD should be approached as one of the factors that interacts with the multiple local factors and conditions that shape learning about teaching. Navigating the demands of teaching with an understanding of how all these factors and conditions interact as a process in which teaching *is* learning provides a foundation for full exploration of the ongoing negotiation of PLD-based learning that can transform practice, which in turn transforms the knowledge offered by PLD and moves practitioners toward the policy goals of improved practice.

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