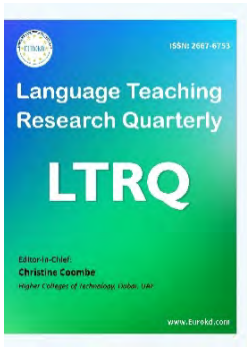

Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2024, Vol. 46, 76–89

A Sociocultural Perspective on Foreign Language Education in State Education Systems

David Hayes

Department of Applied Linguistics, Brock University, Canada

Received *10 April 2024* ***Accepted*** *04 November 2024*

Abstract

This article advocates for a sociocultural perspective on foreign language education policy and practice in state education systems. The article's geographical focus is on selected countries in Asia, though the general arguments may also be applicable to other countries. It examines factors underlying the divergence between policy intentions and educational outcomes in contexts where English is the first, compulsory foreign language in schools and is typically seen as important to economic development in a globalized world. The article also explores inequality of achievement in the contexts under discussion, where the teaching of English can often be characterized as an impediment to educational success for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. A basic premise of sociocultural theory applied to foreign language education is that one cannot separate learners and teachers from the social worlds they inhabit. Hence, the article argues for educational policy and the consequences for practice to be viewed from an 'ecological perspective', one in which what happens between learners and teachers in classrooms can only be understood meaningfully when viewed as part of a social world which includes the school, the local environment, the wider society and the myriad of elements which comprise its social culture and cultural practices.

Keywords: *Teaching and Sociocultural Context, English in State Education Systems, Educational Inequality*

How to cite this article (APA 7th Edition):

Hayes, D. (2024). A sociocultural perspective on foreign language education in state education systems. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, *46*, 76-89. https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2024.46.06

[1]Introduction

[1] This paper is part of a special issue (2024, 46) entitled: In Honour of James P. Lantolf's Contributions to Sociocultural Theory, Second Language Development and Language Pedagogy (edited by Mirosław Pawlak, Zhisheng (Edward) Wen, and Hassan Mohebbi).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: dhayes@brocku.ca
https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2024.46.06

This article advocates for a sociocultural perspective on foreign language education policy and practice in state education systems with a principal focus on selected countries in Asia, though the general arguments may be equally applicable to other countries. It is motivated by a desire to try to understand the divergence between policy intentions and educational outcomes in illustrative contexts where English is the first, compulsory foreign language in schools and is typically seen as important to economic development in a globalized world. The article also explores inequality of achievement in the contexts under discussion, where English teaching can often be characterized as "another obstacle to educational achievement for the world's poor" (Hayes, 2011, p. 337). A basic premise of sociocultural theory applied to foreign language education is that one cannot separate learners and teachers from the social worlds they inhabit (Hayes, 2022b). Hence, the article argues for educational policy and the consequences for practice to be viewed from an 'ecological perspective', one in which what happens between learners and teachers in classrooms can only be understood meaningfully when viewed as part of a social world which includes the school, the local environment, the wider society and the myriad of elements which comprise its social culture and cultural practices. Commenting on the concept of an ecological perspective on learning in the introduction to 'Sociocultural theory and second language learning', Lantolf (2000, pp. 24-25) writes:

> An ecological perspective compels us to reconceptualize learning as always and everywhere contextualized. Thus, not only do language and learner matter, but so do place, time, others, goals, and motives. In an ecological approach, because everything is connected to everything else, one cannot look at any single entity in isolation from the others, without compromising the integrity of the very processes one is trying to understand and foment.

The need to 'reconceptualize learning as always and everywhere contextualized', as Lantolf (2000, p. 24) put it, has inspired an increasing amount of research on L2 learning in and out of the classroom which draws on sociocultural perspectives on teachers' and learners' behaviours. I will briefly discuss two representative examples here. Feryok (2013) utilized concepts of imitation and the Zone of Proximal Development to show how a teacher in a New Zealand university developed his Japanese language learners' autonomy over time, promoting a changed classroom culture through a process which was social in origin. Ma (2017) researched Hong Kong university students' L2 learning mediated by mobile technologies, which are increasingly important social and cultural artefacts in the digital age, and revealed how learners used these technologies for 'generating personalised learning contexts' (p.197). She argued that socio-cultural frameworks in educational contexts needed to incorporate the mediation afforded by digital technology. Both of these articles offer useful insights into the teaching and learning of English as an L2 and demonstrate how research from a sociocultural perspective enables fuller understanding of the complexity of factors which shape learner behaviour in classrooms and personalized learning beyond it. Both also focus on learning at the university level.

However, much less common is research investigating sociocultural factors in L2 learning in state sector primary and secondary schools, particularly in less privileged contexts where digital resources may be limited and teachers constrained by a mandated curriculum which

severely limits their freedom to innovate. This article, therefore, aims to shed light on how teaching and learning in such school systems is shaped by sociocultural and socioeconomic factors beyond the immediate school environment, i.e. the ecology of L2 learning. It reviews policy documents and published research to explicate factors which influence – or even determine – success or failure in school English as a foreign language education.

Ecological Perspectives on Teaching and Learning English

To investigate the teaching and learning of English from an ecological perspective, I consider three key factors affecting educational provision and educational achievement. The first of these takes a macro-perspective and considers the goals of mandated curricula and the achievement levels of students from different socio-economic groups who experience them. The second examines the related factor of English language proficiency targets and national languages; while the third looks inside schools from a micro-perspective to explore teachers' perspectives on teaching, their students and the curriculum.

Curriculum Goals, Achievement Outcomes and (In)equity

If we take an ecological perspective on foreign language education, the common mismatch between intended national curriculum outcomes and actual achievement of the majority of learners who experience the curriculum in many countries may be more readily understood. The prevailing discourse is typically one which apportions blame to teachers for their failure to teach in the prescribed way which would, it is said, enable their learners to meet mandated target proficiency levels. For example, in Malaysia, where English is taught in schools from the first grade and a controversial dual-language programme allows some schools to teach Mathematics and Science through the medium of English, Yunus and Sukri (2017, p. 133) contend that "proficiency of the English language among Malaysians has not seen much improvement since 1970", highlighting a perceived lack of 'progress' in student achievement across almost five decades. Similarly, Shah et al. (2017, p. 193) criticize classroom practice, asserting that "despite many years of exposure and the introduction of various types of approaches and methods of English language instructions, a large number of the [Malaysian] students are still not able to communicate in English competently and effectively".

While the implementation of mandated methods and approaches is often scrutinized, rarely, if ever, is there any critical analysis of the target levels themselves or the appropriacy of the mandated teaching methods to the context. In common with many other countries, the English curriculum in Malaysia envisages teachers using a 'communicative' approach with English the main language of instruction and communication in the classroom. "Conceptually, the CLT [communicative language teaching] approach as conceived should have produced competent users of the English language", as Azman (2016, p. 69) notes. However, this did not occur and Azman (ibid, p. 69) goes on to explain that:

> Instead its implementation had created a distinct chasm in the society, between the urban and the rural as well as between categories of socio-economic status. It is indeed unfortunate that in the twenty years (1983-2003) that the CLT approach was implemented, proficiency in the English language was increasingly influenced by socio-economic factors rather than teaching efficacy.

The mandated communicative approach seemed only to be successful, then, with students who came from higher socio-economic groups in urban areas where English was often used in the home, while "for many outside the urban areas, it [English] is not a commonly used language at all" (Hashim, 2024, p. 259).

Observations of this nature are replicated across the educational discourse in other countries. In South Korea an 'English divide' based on socio-economic class has emerged (Choi, 2024), as in Thailand where "use of English tends to be limited to the urban middle to upper-class Thais" (Trakulkasemsuk, 2018, p. 102). In Sri Lanka too, like Malaysia a former British colony, there exists "a veiled English language-based class system" (Ekanayaka, 2020, p. 341) with high proficiency in the language the preserve of "those who have either grown up with the language or have had the privilege of being educated in the leading private or public sector schools" (ibid, p. 341). Educational authorities are usually well aware of this kind of socio-economic based outcome and declare their intentions to help learners from poor rural areas to succeed, as we see from the reform proposals of the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) in Malaysia:

> We have to ensure that the new programme enables children from poor rural backgrounds to succeed in English, that the style of teaching and learning is appropriate for boys as well as girls, and that the programme makes equitable provision for children from different ethnic backgrounds. (ELSQC, 2015, p. 53)

English Language Proficiency Targets and National Languages

Despite the intentions to enable "children from poor rural backgrounds to succeed in English", as the ELSQC (2015, p. 53) put it, it seems that educational policies take little account of the conditions of teaching and learning in rural areas – or poor urban areas – but instead are predicated on those of more advantaged urban areas. Proficiency targets are a case in point. These have been increasingly based in many educational systems in Asia on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Foley, 2019), although the CEFR itself (Council of Europe, 2020) was originally designed with adults studying languages rather than school-age learners in mind. In Malaysia the objective is for children to reach A1 on the CEFR by the end of Year 3 and A2 by the end of Year 6 in primary schools and B1/B2 by the end of secondary school (where it is assumed less proficient learners not wanting to continue to tertiary education will exit after the end of compulsory schooling in Form 5) (ELSQC, 2015). These targets were mandated despite the evidence of a 2013 baseline study of proficiency in English, conducted to inform the development of a 10-year programme of reforms by the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC, 2015, p. 85), which showed that most learners in schools at all grade levels at that time were not able to meet them, as Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1

CEFR Attainment Levels of Learners by School Grade (%)

	Preschool	Y6	F3	F5	F6
C2					2
C1			1	2	4
B2		1	13	17	21
B1		12	17	26	32
A2	6	22	29	29	27
A1	16	34	28	27	14
< A1	78	32	12		

Moreover, detailed analysis showed that children in rural areas performed less well than those in urban areas in a pattern consistent across school years (ELSQC, 2015).

In situations such as this, where teacher-learner communication in English is an unrealistic objective, teachers tend to resort to using their shared first language (L1) in the interests of their students achieving at least some level of comprehension of the input, even though in policy documents extensive use of the L1 is generally regarded as detrimental to learning the L2. This is not a new phenomenon and has been identified in many studies over the years (see e.g., Ali, ELSQ; Othman and Kiely, 2016). Moreover, amongst the majority Malay population in the country there is longstanding ambivalence towards the use of English. Their preference is to use the Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia, which is integral to their religious, cultural and linguistic identity, enshrined "in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which defines them as people who practice Islam and the Malay culture and who speak the Malay language (Article 160)" (Rajadurai, 2010, p. 94). Hence, as Ting (2003, p. 205) put it, "The Malays are particularly wary of speaking English to another Malay because English is often perceived as subtracting from their Malay identity by their community". In this situation, opportunities for communicating in English become restricted, which has the additional impact of reducing the prospect for rural Malays, in particular, of acquiring sufficient proficiency in the language to gain access to élite English-speaking communities in the country (Rajadurai, 2010).

In Thailand, similar English proficiency targets have recently adopted (though are still in the process of implementation) which are based on a modified version of the CEFR, the 'Framework of Reference for English Language Education in Thailand' (FRELE-TH), as in Table 2 (Hiranburana et al., 2017, p. 100).

Table 2

CEFR and FRELE-TH Equivalency Table

Standard Level	CEFR Proficiency Level	FRELE-TH Level
	A1	1
Basic user		2
	A2	3
		4
	B1	5
Independent user		6
	B2	7
		8
Proficient user	C1	9
	C2	10

Students are expected to achieve FRELE-TH level 3 by the end of primary school (Grade

6), level 4 by the end of lower secondary school (Grade 9) and level 5 by the end of upper secondary school (Grade 12). There is as yet no national level test of achievement allied to the framework and student achievement in English is currently measured by the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) at Grades 6, 9 and 12 which also assesses achievement in Thai, general science and mathematics (as well as social science in Grade 12). The construction of the test has been widely criticized, and was even cancelled in 2020 for Grade 6 and Grade 9 students, largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic (Bangkok Post, 2021b). However, O-NET results are still used as an indicator of school achievement levels nationally, and there is considerable debate when they are released. Some prestigious private schools in Bangkok publicize their students' success, such as the following on a school's social media account[2]:

> Congratulations to Year 7 and Year 10 students on the excellent O-NET exam result in the academic year 2023. Once again, our students proved their skills and knowledge as 9 of them achieved the highest score of 100 points in English.

In contrast, much of the public discourse centres on poor outcomes, given that scores for English are generally well below 50%. English scores for Grade 6 students (the end of primary school) in 2022 averaged just 39.22%. Recent results for Grade 9 and Grade 12 students have been difficult to find but for Grade 9 (the end of compulsory schooling) the average score in English was 34.38% in 2020 and for Grade 12 the average was 29.94% (Durongkaveroj, 2022). The urban-rural divide seen in Malaysia was also apparent in Thailand, as Durongkaveroj (2022, p. 7) observed: "High-performing provinces are those that are richer and more developed, measured by their income per capita. The low-performing provinces are remote and poorer". For Durongkaveroj (2022, p. 6) the O-NET results highlight "a worrying trend in academic performance among secondary students living in different areas and could worsen inequality in education in the country".

Again, in common with Malaysia, the importance of the national language, Thai, has to be taken into account when one considers achievement levels in a foreign language such as English. Though attitudes to English are largely positive as its putative instrumental value is widely endorsed (see e.g. Hayes, 2016), the primary language of communication and marker of national identity for most students and teachers is Thai, the importance of which is reinforced daily in the education system. The Basic Education Core Curriculum aims to foster "Knowledge, skills and culture in [Thai] language application for communication; delight in and appreciation of Thai wisdom; and pride in national language" (MOE, 2008, p. 10). More directly, a recent government (in power until 2023) required all schools to promote twelve 'precepts' among students and which, amongst other things, were designed to reinforce adherence to prescribed notions of 'Thainess' (Watson Todd & Darasawang, 2021). These precepts derive from the long-established 'Twelve Cultural Mandates', one of which focuses on the centrality of the Thai language to being Thai and declares "Thai people must extol, honour and respect the Thai language, and must feel honoured to speak it" (Draper, 2019, p. 233). Taken together, these government directives emphasize a Thai-focused social identity,

[2] As the account includes names and photos of the successful students, it is not referenced here.

respectful of authority figures and Thai traditions where, as Trakulkasemsuk (2018, p. 99) says, "few people use or need to use English since Standard Thai continues to hold its strong position as the only national and official language of the country". Within such a sociocultural context, the goal of students becoming independent users of English by the time they leave upper secondary school, future participants in a globalized economy dependent on creativity and critical thinking for its continued success, seems unrealistic.

It is not only students whose proficiency in English is under scrutiny. In Malaysia, teachers' proficiency was assessed in the baseline study referred to earlier, with 29% of primary school teachers below B2 (independent user) on the CEFR, with the ELSQC stating that "the results are likely to present a somewhat optimistic impression of the overall situation […] For example, about 31.7% of teachers currently teaching English in schools are not English optionists" (ELSQC, 2015, p. 169). The results for secondary school teachers in Forms 1-5 were not given but the ELSQC report that of 19,000 teachers surveyed, 4,815 were teaching English despite being trained to teach other subjects (ibid, p. 205). This was said to be "contributing to falling standards in the quality of English language teaching and learning in the country" (ibid, p. 207).

In Thailand, teachers' proficiency in English has been a long-standing topic of concern amongst education officials and in the public discourse. Teachers attending in-service courses at Regional English Training Centres from 2016-18 completed a standardized test prior to the courses, with the results shown in Table 3 (Hayes, 2018).

Table 3

CEFR Results for Teachers Attending RETC Courses

CEFR level	No. of teachers	%
A1	1133	9.3
A2	6194	50.6
B1	3910	32.0
B2	926	7.6
C1	72	0.6
C2	1	0.0
Total	12236	100.0

The data reveal that 9.3% of these Thai teachers were at CEFR A1 and 50.6% at A2 or 'Basic User' level. Thus, more than half (59.9%) could not meet the proposed B1 target for upper secondary school leavers, 32% were able to do so while just 7.6% were above the target with a B2 level, and a mere 0.6% reached the 'Proficient User' C1 level. The tendency in the public discourse is to blame teachers for their 'unacceptable' proficiency levels or, as the Bangkok Post (2021a) stated, "The most important problem is the low proficiency of Thai English teachers".

In Malaysia also, the sole criterion for teachers to be selected for 'upskilling' on an in-service professional development course was their language proficiency. (Hiew, 2016) records the impact this had on a number of teachers in the eastern state of Sabah, one of whom commented (p. 193):

> I don't understand why we have to attend this course after sitting for the Aptis [language] test when, furthermore, some of us have been teaching for quite long and we have performed well in school without sitting for that evaluation. So, does that mean we are evaluated by just that test? We have performed, you know. I have performed. I told [the trainer]. 'I have performed. I dare to say that because I really have performed. I have increased my school's UPSR[3] result. I have students who were not B or A, but they got B or A. I have very weak students. I got 5 students who we didn't expect to pass. They passed. So that means I know I have performed. I have used my own method. I have used a lot of activities. That means I spent so much time, but still that is not enough?

While a good command of their subject matter is obviously a prerequisite for any teacher, assessing their proficiency with a standardized online test referenced to the CEFR does not provide any information about how teachers use their English proficiency in the classroom to promote students' learning. For teachers of English to be effective, they need to be more than competent speakers of the language. Thus, failing to include any assessment of pedagogic skills in selecting teachers for 'upskilling' omits a crucial component of teachers' effectiveness with inevitable consequences for their self-esteem as teachers, as Hiew's (2016) interviewee demonstrates. Hayes (2022a, p. 35) also comments on the use of standardized CEFR-related testing for teachers:

> The value of defining teachers' professional identities simply in terms of their proficiency levels on a scale which was not designed for their circumstances is highly questionable [and the results should not be used] to castigate teachers, whose levels of English are limited by the quality of their own experiences as students in school and as teachers in training in university.

An analysis of teaching and learning in context indicates that teachers' proficiency levels are just one aspect of reality for English language teaching in many classrooms in Thailand and Malaysia. Taking a broader sociocultural perspective on English language education requires us to look at teachers' *efficacy* in the classroom as well as the suitability of the proficiency scale itself for testing teachers (and even the context of teachers' own school and higher education foundational language learning experiences). I now turn to an examination of classroom contexts – the conditions in schools – which have a bearing on teachers' efficacy.

Inside schools: Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching, Students and the Curriculum

Other aspects of reality for teachers and learners of English in both Thailand and Malaysia can be uncovered by investigating classroom conditions in schools from the perspective of teachers rather than educational policy makers. When we do this, we can begin to understand the contextual factors which inform teachers' day-to-day practices. There is an abundance of published research which describes the factors which influence – if not determine – teachers' everyday classroom practices. For example, in Thailand, since the 1990s the policy has been

[3] UPSR is the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah, or primary school leaving examination.

for teachers to adopt a communicative approach in the classroom, minimizing the use of Thai and emphasizing English as the language of classroom communication. However, a teacher interviewed in Hayes (2022a, p. 38) bluntly stated that using English is:

> not real, because in our society we don't really use English and the students know I can speak Thai. I always try to speak English with my students and they always reply in Thai because they know I can understand Thai. That's the problem for me. […] All teachers, I think, are willing to speak English but the society doesn't … like, we use Thai.

If using English is contrary to societal expectations, mandating the use of CLT approaches in the classroom and setting specific proficiency targets seems to be set up for failure. One can also argue that these mandates are contrary to the concept of 'learner-centred' teaching and learning which is advocated in the National Education Act (NEA) of B.E. 2542 (1999) which stipulated:

> 1. **Learning reform** which will follow the guideline and spirit of the provisions in the Act by attaching **highest importance to learners**. The ONEC [Office of the National Education Commission] has conducted research and development on learner-centred teaching-learning process allowing learners to develop at their own pace and in accord with their potential. (ONEC, 1999, p. 26, numbering and emphasis in original)

In addition, Section 21 of the NEA stated that "In organizing the learning process, educational institutions and agencies concerned shall: (1) provide substance and arrange activities in line with the learners' interests and aptitudes, bearing in mind individual differences" (ONEC, 1999, p. 11). Genuine learner-centredness and 'bearing in mind individual differences' would enable teachers to respond appropriately and creatively to situations like that faced by a Thai teacher with first year secondary school students who said that "Many of our M1[4] students cannot read English", or another who commented "We have big classes, many students. Some of the [communicative] activities cannot be applied in the real [classroom] situation. And they don't serve what our students really want". Another teacher commented on the impact of the O-NET standardized testing in schools, saying "I use the [communicative] techniques sometimes, not often. It is because maybe we are preparing the students for the tests, such as O-NET, or something like that" (Hayes, 2022a, pp. 39-40).

In Malaysia, there are almost identical problems with implementing a communicative language teaching approach in many schools. In a study of primary school English teachers in the state of Malaka, Hardman and A-Rahman (2014, p. 270) report that the teachers had challenges with:

> the problems of having to manage large classes of pupils with mixed learning abilities, low levels of proficiency in the English language, the need to get through

[4] 'M' refers to the secondary level of schooling, 'Mathayom', of which M1 would be the first secondary grade.

> specified content in the curriculum and the pressures to prepare the children for end-of-year assessments [as well as] not enough support provided to aid the implementation of the communicative approach and that there was a mismatch between the curriculum and how it was assessed […] discussions with the teachers revealed that the teachers were unsure of what the term interactive learner-centred teaching meant in practice.

That these are common problems, particularly in rural schools in Malaysia, is confirmed by Renganathan's (2023) review of research into English language education which concluded that:

> the disadvantages rural contexts have such as lack of need and limited social practice for the use of English, poor infrastructure and limited resources in schools to support English language education, lack of support from students' home, and English language teachers using students' L1 to facilitate classroom teaching, were reported. As such, having standardised examinations to gauge rural students' performance in English language education will always be problematic. (p. 800)

The situation is exacerbated for indigenous students in rural areas, whose home language is not the national language. Mihat (2015) studied the implementation of the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR)[5], in indigenous classrooms in one state, finding that 60% of teachers surveyed thought KSSR did not take account of indigenous children's language background and that the terminal learning objectives were "too ambitious for indigenous pupils to achieve" (ibid, p. 6). Teachers also reported difficulties caused by the syllabus assuming an initial literacy level at the start of Year 1 that their students did not have, since their attendance at pre-school programmes was limited, allied to the fact that their L1s did not have written forms.

Even students who have been successful in school examinations report difficulties using English for communication at university level. A second-year university student in Ali et al.'s (2011, p. 154) study, who had scored the highest possible grade in English in his school-leaving examination, reported that:

> Sometimes we knew what to say. But we had problems to express in words because we were not used to speaking English. We knew what to say but when speaking, we faltered. We couldn't think, [we were] not used to it.

This issue is exacerbated by the strong social preference for Malays to speak their L1, which we noted earlier. In this vein, another student cited in Ali et al. (2011, p. 155), who also received the highest grades when leaving secondary school, remarked that:

> Actually, I tell you sincerely, I felt shy to use English. If I or he used English, those students at the back would start saying, 'Eey, speak in Bahasa Melayu,

[5] KSSR was initially introduced in 2011, and a revised version began implementation in 2017.

> enough'. Something like that. So people like us, who wanted to speak in English, felt discouraged. If we do, those friends at the back would not understand what we asked. And also they made fun of us.

Ali et al. (2011, p. 155) note the paradox of educational policy requiring learners to be able to communicate in English when this is not a 'sociolinguistic reality' in society at large:

> the reality is that English is not essential for everyday communication, since all citizens are required to learn and use BM, the national language. This sociolinguistic reality makes the goal of English-in-education policy that requires students to be able to communicate in English somewhat paradoxical: students need to practise and communicate in English to develop communicative competence, but this communication in English in real life is unnecessary, unnatural and, to some extent, undesirable.

They conclude that "stakeholders' perceptions and experiences" in their study "demonstrate a discontinuity or a lack of communication between macro-level planning and the micro-level reality" (Ali et al., 2011, p. 160)

This is not to say, of course, that those who devise educational policies are not well-intentioned, but the evidence suggests that the policies do not take adequate (if any) account of the contexts in which they are supposed to be implemented. In both Malaysia and Thailand, the English language curriculum is linked to the CEFR and predicated on the western-derived CLT approach (Fazil et al., 2018; Methitham, 2009); and in both countries the teachers who are responsible for making it work in the classroom are required to implement policies and methods developed through centralized decision-making from which they are excluded. Methitham (2009) commented on the current Thai curriculum that it was "entirely initiated from above", a practice which functioned to "disempower [teachers'] instructional judgements and devalue their teaching experience" (p. 37). Teachers may have no choice about accepting a national, officially mandated curriculum in theoretical terms, but they have *de facto* control over how it is implemented in the classroom in practice. If the curriculum and its associated teaching methods are at odds with teachers' experience of the realities of their classroom contexts and their learners, they will inevitably respond in ways which they think appropriate to these realities. So-called failure to teach in prescribed ways should not always be seen, then, to be a result of teachers' deficiencies or lack of pedagogic abilities, but an appropriate context-specific response to prevailing teaching-learning circumstances.

Conclusion

Sociocultural Context and English Language Education Policy and Practice

From the foregoing discussion, it can be argued that stipulating unrealistic proficiency targets for English in national education systems is self-defeating in contexts where English is a foreign language and not part of the sociolinguistic reality of learners' lives beyond school. This is especially so if the need for *widespread* proficiency in English for national economic purposes is far from proven. Indeed, much labour market research concludes that what is most important for employment is high level skills in in-demand sectors – such as information

technology – and that proficiency in English is only an asset when added to those skills. Ricento (2018, p. 221) observes that:

> the role and utility of English worldwide is a vehicle for some people, in some economic sectors, mainly the knowledge economy, but is generally not connected to socioeconomic mobility for the vast majority of the global workforce.

If Ricento's (2018) observation has general applicability, and if, as Ali et al. (2011) conclude in their research in Malaysia, students' "limited proficiency achievement was attributable to, among other factors, the sociolinguistic make-up of the society, the communicative resources and constraints, and the relevance of communicative competence as a goal" (p. 163), it would seem that policymakers ought first to begin with an analysis of their social and educational contexts and determine what is possible in those contexts as a prerequisite for curriculum development. Given that this is far from the norm, Ali et al.'s (2011) comment on curriculum development in Malaysia that "It is hard to be optimistic about the outcomes of the new policy which simply does not take account of these realities on the ground" (p. 163) is likely to continue to be a self-fulfilling prophecy and applicable to other contexts in which policies fail to take account of 'realities on the ground'. As I have suggested elsewhere (Hayes, 2023, p. 33):

> In an ideal world, policy makers would benefit from spending time in a cross-section of schools with their teachers and students, listening to their concerns and learning about the conditions in which they work and the nature of the communities that their schools serve, before they began to develop the policies which they expect others to implement.

Unless contextual realities are placed at the forefront of policymaking, there will continue to be 'dissonance', as Loo et al. (2019) found in Thailand, between curriculum expectations of what teaching in schools should be like and the reality of many classrooms, a dissonance which often compels teachers to abandon mandated learner-centred, communicative approaches and adopt more 'traditional' teacher-focused approaches. When they are faced with practical obstacles in curriculum implementation, "some of which were the Thai students' inability to communicate in English and the use of a syllabus that did not reflect the students' language abilities" (Loo et al., 2019, p. 414), it is hardly surprising that teachers consider such teacher-centred methods to be more appropriate in their classroom contexts.

To reiterate what Lantolf (2000, pp. 24-25) said almost a quarter of a century ago, "because everything is connected to everything else, one cannot look at any single entity in isolation from the others, without compromising the integrity of the very processes one is trying to understand and foment". Thus, since 'everything is connected to everything else', if governments wish to develop effective English language programmes in their educational systems, there is an urgent need to align curriculum outcomes with the system capacity to attain them, taking account of the prevailing sociolinguistic, sociocultural and socio-educational realities of their contexts.

ORCID

https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4664-8942

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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