

Exploring ‘Unknown Worlds’: The Lives and Careers of Non-Native Speaking Teachers of English in Asia

Assistant Prof. Dr. David Hayes

Department of Applied Linguistics
Faculty of Humanities
Brock University
500 Glenridge Avenue, St. Catherines
Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1

dhayes@brocku.ca

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ABSTRACT

It is a decade since Richards remarked that “How the teacher believes, thinks, acts and reacts is central to educational endeavour, but about the EFL (English as a foreign language) language teacher we know almost nothing” (1997:243), going on to suggest that the world of the teacher of English as a foreign language was *terra incognita* (1997:251). Regrettably, this remains particularly true of non-native speaking teachers of English working in their own state educational systems. Even within particular countries the experiences of ‘ordinary’ teachers – who are far from ‘ordinary’ in so many ways – is given little prominence in debates about educational innovation and improvement. We hear so much about methods and materials in English language teaching but too little about the teachers who work with these in their classrooms on a daily basis. This paper argues, then, that much greater importance needs to be given to investigating and understanding the contexts of English language teaching in all their variety, within countries and across countries, from the perspective of teachers themselves. It will draw on life history interview data from teachers in Sri Lanka and Thailand to illustrate what may be gained from such research in three important areas:

1. as a means of extending the knowledge base of English language teaching worldwide;
2. as a means of redressing western – non-western imbalances in status, power and prestige within ELT; and
3. as a means of enabling teachers to reflect on their own lives and careers as a means of professional self-realisation and self-empowerment.

It is surely time that the voices of classroom teachers were heard more widely, their experiences and perceptions given greater prominence in our professional thinking and this paper hopes to contribute to that process.

INTRODUCTION

It is a decade since Richards remarked that “How the teacher believes, thinks, acts and reacts is central to educational endeavour, but about the EFL [English as a foreign language] language teacher we know almost nothing” (1997:243), going on to suggest that the world of the teacher of English as a foreign language was *terra incognita* (1997:251). In Richards’ paper the focus was on native-speaking teachers of EFL. How much more is his statement true of non-native speaking (NNS) teachers of English working in their own state education systems? Let’s first note the scale of NNS teacher populations involved. For example, Bolton (2004: 388) has calculated that in China alone the number of secondary school teachers of English totals some 500,000. In the much smaller countries discussed in this paper, Thailand and Sri Lanka, if we take English teachers to be around one tenth of the total teaching force, there are some 42,000 and 18,500 teachers of English respectively. These teachers teach English to almost 4 million schoolchildren in Sri Lanka and eight and a half million schoolchildren in Thailand. What is it that they do every day in their classrooms? How do they teach? What do they think about teaching and about being teachers? About the careers and classroom lives of teachers of English in countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka – and Malaysia too – we know virtually nothing. We can only echo Péter Medgyes’ (2000: 445) conclusion that “On the whole, the study of the non-native teacher remains a largely unexplored area in language education”. This must partly be because, in Canagarajah’s (1999: 85) words, in the teaching of English as a foreign language “expertise is defined and dominated by native speakers” and so the experiences of NNS teachers are a minority interest despite their overwhelming numerical majority.

In this paper, although a native speaker of English myself, I do not wish to discuss expertise in terms of any ‘right way’ to teach or any ‘latest methodology’ exported from the west guaranteed to bring success to the English language classroom. Instead I wish to explore the realities of English teaching in Thailand (with occasional reference also to Sri Lanka) as experienced by NNS teachers themselves. In doing this I shall rely on the perspectives of the teachers, expressed in their own words, gathered through in-depth interviewing, supplemented on occasion by classroom observation notes. To uncover the experiences of NNS teachers in context is important, not least because, as Harmer (2003: 338) says “the social context in which learning takes place is of vital importance to the success of the educational endeavour”. Teachers of English in countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka are teachers in their state educational systems first and foremost: to a certain extent their identity as subject teachers is subordinate to that.

In the classroom: ‘methods’

The search for a ‘best’ method is the search for the holy grail of English language teaching. Ultimately it is a futile search because it has long since been shown that there really is no best method. As long ago as 1988 Allwright reviewed research on methods in use in the classroom and noted that fifty years of research involving large-scale methodological comparisons had failed to prove the relative superiority of any one teaching method over another. No research has been published since to challenge this conclusion. If this is the case, does it really matter which methods teachers use in their classes? Well, yes and no. No, in the sense that we will never find a

best method. Yes in the sense that all teaching must be based on ‘methods’ or techniques of some kind, not as defined in any prescriptive sense but more as a set of ‘organizing principles’ that teachers bring to their classrooms. This relates to what Prabhu (1990) said about a teacher having a “sense of plausibility” about the teaching approaches s/he uses in the classroom.

What do teachers in Thailand (and Sri Lanka) have a sense of plausibility about – what kind of classroom practices? Holliday notes that in terms of classroom practice the ‘traditional’ is no longer entirely the teacher-fronted, grammar-translation class of popular imagination but that “many ... communicative practices have been established for a long time and have indeed become themselves traditional” (Holliday, 2005: 11). Communicative language teaching (CLT) could now be said to be the dominant paradigm in English teaching worldwide, at least in its theoretical representation in official curriculum documents. The customary features of a communicative approach are generally held to be a concern for “creative language use and student-centring” (Mitchell and Lee, 2003: 56) which “places a greater emphasis on the use of the foreign language in the classroom” (Mangubhai *et al.*, 2005: 32). In the school syllabi in Thailand and Sri Lanka there is certainly a strong focus on the communicative value of English. But we must also recognise that in its practical classroom application CLT means different things to different people. Research has shown that interpretations of what is meant by CLT differ from teacher to teacher even when all were following a CLT-based curriculum (Mangubhai *et al.*, 2005) and that CLT should not be seen as a unified construct (Mitchell and Lee, 2003).

Against this background, amongst all the informants I have interviewed, whether Thai or Sri Lankan, there was high value placed upon the need to use English to communicate in the class and, generally, support in principle for the communicative approach; as one of the Thai informants, Sudarat, said: “*I try to find how can I encourage my students to speak more English.*” In the case of the Thai informants as a group (seven in total) there was no uniformity expressed of how the communicative approach was used in their own classes, or, indeed, whether it was used at all on a continuing basis. Sudarat made clear that there was misunderstanding within the Thai teaching community about what CLT and the student-centred teaching at its basis meant. Her view of the prevailing understanding was that “*many schools focus on the worksheets, you know, the worksheets and a lot of exercises. It means student-centred, that’s it now. I think they have misunderstood about this*” (Sudarat). Other informants offered support in general terms for CLT but did not always see it as a priority for Thai teachers. When asked about the communicative approach another teacher, Naraporn, seemed to indicate that it was something more appropriate for foreigners than Thais and could even be restricted to certain weeks in the school semester.

It’s very good and right now, here in my school, we have 40 teachers altogether, and then we still have the communicative approach. And that’s why we have two foreigners here to help because our English, our accent, Thai accent is a bit difficult for foreigners sometimes to listen to. But it’s good – communicative approach – it’s good. [...]

This week, in this school, communicative teaching is until this week because next week we will have the final examination. We do this [communicative approach] along with traditional styles because I have to teach grammatical points to them. I have to talk about present perfect, I have to talk about present or past continuous,

things like that. We still have to talk about this. (Naraporn)

She also explicitly stated that *“I don’t talk English when I talk about grammar, many more understand”* (Naraporn), a practice which she related to the demands of the university entrance examination. Other teachers also commented on examination demands as we shall see shortly.

In common with Naraporn, Ladda also maintained the overall applicability of the communicative approach but felt that in her own classrooms there was a need to adapt to situational realities and so use more Thai and even the local north-eastern dialect (which she referred to as Lao). Following lesson observation (11th February 2005) in which it was remarked that she used a considerable amount of Thai she commented:

Yeah, some Lao.

I: Why do you do that?

Because I have learnt from experience. Some students remember a lot and learn when we compare with the meaning of Lao; and some students don’t understand English. (Ladda)

For Arunee the approach and the amount of English used depended on the class. Lesson observation notes for her M6/1 (M = Mathayom, or secondary) class (23rd June 2003) recorded *“Class predominantly in English. Some Thai during latter stages of grammar explanations”* and for another class of the same grade, M6/7, *“Much more Thai [than for M6/1] used to check vocab, confirm instructions. Most students clearly not understanding much [English] though some busy writing in their books”*. In Arunee’s school, as in most schools in Thailand, classes were arranged according to ability (M6/1 being rated more highly than M6/7) and at M6 level it was the university entrance examination rather than the needs of the students that seemed to determine how children should be taught. When asked about the different approaches in the two lessons in the interview Arunee commented – *“I need to guide them [Class M6/7]”* – and noted that school requirements meant *“We have to give them the same evaluation”* so the classes had to cover the same material. She complained: *“And one of the obstacles that we are fighting, we are struggling now, is because we cannot do the child-centred activity for this level, especially M6, because of the entrance examination.”* Clearly the use of particular methods may be determined by contextual constraints over which teachers have no control. But this did not mean that the intention to adopt an approach using English, in accordance with the curriculum, was not there amongst the teachers interviewed.

Sudarat consistently expressed her desire to use English in the class as much as possible; and was unfailingly observed to do so with her secondary school classes. Nevertheless she found difficulties implementing her approach when she moved institutions, contrasting her experience in school with that of her new role in Teachers’ College:

With my students at [school] I could use English the whole period [...] I said [to the college students] I’m Thai but I like to speak English when I teach English, because in their schools they have never heard any English sounds from their English teachers. So I asked them ... how did you study, how did your teachers teach you? They told me that they just follow the textbook and they have no chance to interact in English. (Sudarat)

It would seem, then, from her college students' reactions that Sudarat's own teaching methods were far from being the norm in other Thai schools; and, indeed, we have seen that other Thai informants interviewed for this study sometimes adopted classroom practices which were at variance with the requirements of the national curriculum. However, the persistence of the older traditional, teacher-fronted, grammar-translation approaches should not always be thought of simply in deficit terms, i.e. in a lack of understanding or willingness of teachers to implement a communicative approach. Most teachers teach as they do because they believe that the methods adopted are effective for the purpose. The data indicates not only that informants were aware of the principles of a communicative approach and its place in the curriculum but that the older approaches persist because some teachers find them useful and appropriate for certain purposes with certain groups of learners. This "persistence of inherited traditions of teaching" (Pomson, 2002: 23) has been found in other contexts (see, e.g., Sato and Kleinsasser, 2004) and in Thailand Pomson's conclusion would seem to be pertinent that inherited traditions persist because they are seen to be useful in their particular contexts of occurrence and that they continue "a not-yet-completed narrative" (Pomson, 2002: 24; citing MacIntyre, 1985: 221). To refer to Sri Lanka this would also be true for one of the teachers interviewed there, Krishnan, who said "*The older traditions, some of them, memorising words, memorising spellings and abstract affairs, also can be brought in – but not hurting the children but promoting the children, that's what I think*" (Krishnan). The perceptions reported in the data indicate, then, that teachers use methods which they feel to be appropriate to the purpose of promoting children's learning – and to enable them to pass key examinations – and that these may, on occasion, not be those specified in national curricula. Though teachers have little professional autonomy in relation to officially mandated curricula, they retain *de facto* independence over the degree to which an official curriculum is actually implemented in the classroom.

At a different educational level the only male Thai teacher interviewed, Suthee, who had moved from secondary school to teaching in a technological university (via Teachers' College), was, like Sudarat, someone who wanted to use English as much as possible in class. He had also found that his students had rarely heard English at school and negotiated to use English with them in his university classes. In a well-resourced university he also made use of a variety of media in his classes.

And now I get to make use of different types of media, you see. I use the handouts, I use the cassettes, I use computers, I use the internet and I introduce my students to different things in the internet that they can make use of in helping them to improve their English. (Suthee)

He gave an instance of one interactive site which his students enjoyed so much that learning became almost subliminal.

And then the students just laugh and in the meantime they learn pronunciation, they learn vocabulary, they learn speaking and listening as well. (Suthee)

The kind of creativity that Suthee showed in the use of technology in the classroom is also evident in the work of other teachers. To cite just one more example, Sasikarn, teaching in secondary school, reported how she took her students out of the class to practise.

Like giving directions, I took them outside and they work like a team, teamwork,

like one blindfolds their eyes and the other one gives the directions. Like they have to go straight on and turn right and turn left; and then which pair reaches the finishing line first without hitting the – you know I use the thread to tie up from one tree to another tree and then they can walk along there – the pair that reaches the finishing line without hitting the thread that I tie up so they were the winners. They enjoy it. I took them outside and did a lot of activities. (Sasikarn)

These were not necessarily activities that she had learnt on any teacher-training course as she noted “*that kind of activity, outdoors activity, I got it from the scout camp. I just adapt into English*” (Sasikarn).

Classroom teaching and the methods that teachers use are, then, many, varied and frequently imaginative, but selection of methods is always principled. There are instances of teachers who adopt older traditional methods – grammar translation – in their teaching for a variety of reasons and do this well. Equally there are instances of teachers using well what are usually termed communicative methods. The data reveals that from the perceptions of the teachers interviewed there is no one way to teach and no one way in which to best meet the needs of students.

Teacher professionalism and expertise

From the discussion so far we can conclude that there are a variety of methods enacted in Thai classrooms, some of them reflecting official syllabi and the new dominant paradigm of CLT; others reflecting previously dominant paradigms which are held to have continuing applicability in certain circumstances. However, if method doesn't matter to the degree that we hope it should, what other factors might there be that influence the educational effectiveness of NNS teachers of English in their school systems? What are the characteristics of effective teaching? Bell (2003: 333) looks at teacher effectiveness in this way:

As has been pointed out many times, it is not the method that is the crucial variable in successful pedagogy but the teacher's passion for whatever method is embraced and the way that passion is passed on to the learners (Block, 2001). ... To believe in what we as teachers are doing inevitably requires us to have a set of prescriptions when we arrive in the classroom, a set of beliefs we are committed to. As one teacher notes, “Learning will take place when students believe in ‘teachers’. And when will students do that? Regrettably, only when teachers believe in themselves” (Walker, 1999, p. 231).

There is ample evidence in the interviews that these particular teachers had a strong belief in themselves, as expressed in a commitment to the value of their work to students in their schools and to the society at large.

Their commitment came from outside as well as from within the individual. Sudarat, for example, drew strength from her family: “*My family helped me a lot, especially my mother.*” But she derived her primary motivation from a desire to help her students to realise their potential and from wanting to help improve English teaching in Thailand. A strong sense of duty and integrity comes across in these comments:

When I taught at [previous] school I wanted to make my students enter university,

as many students as possible. When I came here I want my students to improve, especially English majors, to be good English teachers and to improve their English a lot. [...] I plan to help my students and I plan to help Thailand in terms of teachers of English. I would like to see English teachers improve in their careers more than this. I would like to see good models of teachers and I would like to see Thai students speak English more fluently than nowadays. (Sudarat)

In common with teachers in many other countries, hard work was sometimes motivated by economic necessity as well as being a quality of the individual. Naraporn's working commitments, in addition to her duties at school, encompassed part-time weekend teaching at the local Teachers' College and private tuition after school hours. She was also writing a series of textbooks and studying part-time for a PhD in educational administration at a local university. Her only free time was one Sunday every two weeks when she got up "*late in the morning about six o'clock, normally I start at five*" (Naraporn) and spent time with her family. She felt strongly that her contented home life – "*My husband is just like my close friend. And my three boys, we feel very close*" (Naraporn) – enabled her to do more than others could do. But her willingness to work long hours on her textbooks was also motivated by a desire to show what it was possible for Thai teachers to achieve:

The main thing, I would like to present my ideas to the world, to show everyone that Thai teachers, Thai local teachers can do this kind of thing. I would like to show them that. (Naraporn)

Commitment to their work was also manifested in the everyday, local actions that these teachers took with their school students. From observation (Notes, 21st February 2003) it was clear that Sasikarn was a skilled classroom practitioner with the ability to empathise with her students and develop in them a desire to learn. She recalled the situation when she moved to her second school and had (as is common with teachers new to a school) been given an M6 class considered by other teachers to contain a large number of 'naughty' boys. The naughtiness was restricted to many of the students skipping class regularly but this was potentially damaging to them as 80% attendance was required in order for students to pass the course and so graduate from school. Rather than leave the students to their own devices Sasikarn made the effort to persuade them back to class.

So I just try to look for them and then, you know, talk to them – not like in other teachers' ways but in my way. I gave them the good reasons to come to the class and what will happen if they skip the class [...] but if they come back and start the lesson they have a chance to pass. (Sasikarn)

When asked if they did return she said:

Yeah, they did. [...] I was happy about these students and then they remembered me after they graduated from the school. They came back and they said "Thank you very much, Ajarn. At least I know something, I learnt something from you." That's the good thing. (Sasikarn)

Sasikarn continues to gain immense satisfaction from doing her job well in the classroom, and invests a considerable amount of 'emotional labour' (Isenbarger and Zembylas, 2006) into enacting a stance as a caring teacher. When asked if she enjoyed being a teacher she said:

Yes, especially teaching in the classroom. And especially when I, you know, work to prepare for the lesson and the students interact in the class, that's the best. But if I don't have time to prepare, I just use my experience and talk to the students in the classroom without materials or without techniques, it's very boring. I think so.
(Sasikarn)

This enjoyment in the interaction with students, in helping them to learn, is a major source of satisfaction for teachers, whatever their situation. As Estola *et al.* (2003: 239) found: "Vocation is ultimately adopted in practice and it shapes practice." Certainly, enjoyment in teaching was a universal theme amongst the informants here – "*I always enjoy teaching, no matter where*" as Suthee said – and the desire to teach well a strong motivating force – "*The thing that stimulates me is I just would like to be a good teacher*" as Ladda said. Teachers also recognise that their impact on students can extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom. We have seen how Sasikarn was concerned that her 'naughty' students did not harm their prospects of graduation from school; and a Sri Lankan teacher, Bandara, commented that he derived satisfaction from "*seeing that you are making an impact on their lives*".

Of course, this strong service ethic was not necessarily shared by all of these teachers' colleagues. When asked why she worked so hard, late at night and early in the morning while others in her school did not, Sasikarn explained:

Why? Because it's my job, my duty. I have to do it.

I: But it's other people's duty, they didn't do it.

That's the problem, see.

I: So why did you do it? They didn't do it. Didn't you just look at their example and say well they don't do it, why should I do it?

If I do that, that will be another thing and then nobody will do anything about it.

Just let it go and it will be like the wreck in the department. [laughs]

Sasikarn makes clear that in the final analysis dedication to work is a personal responsibility. She works "*because I would like to do it. I enjoy doing it. It's my job. Whenever I was assigned to do something, I'll do my best*". Some teachers will always give everything they can to their work, while others will not. Some are always striving to improve themselves so that they can do their jobs better while others are not. In this respect teaching is no different to any other profession. All the Thai informants seemed to share a desire for self-improvement, taking higher degrees where possible and taking advantage of in-service training opportunities. Sasikarn, for example, stated that she went to take a diploma and then MA in TEFL as well as going to America for a year on a teacher exchange programme because "*My knowledge is just this bit, only tiny bit*" and "*My English is not good enough, yes. My duty comes first, my English is not good enough*".

CONCLUSION

From the discussion it seems to be clear that if we consider what makes an effective teacher we have to go far beyond the boundaries of the technical aspects of teaching – the methods used in the classroom. Methods are important but they are just one aspect of what it takes to be a successful teacher. Throughout the history of language teaching, some teachers have managed to inspire their students to learn while others, using the same methods, have not. Other

characteristics are important in determining the success of a teacher and we can turn to the perspectives of one of the Thai teachers for an overview. Suthee gave a number of key qualities for success in teaching – hard work, devotion, sincerity, honesty, trust, helpfulness and friendliness. Methods were not seen to be so important if these were visualized as uncritical adherence to one method – “*We can’t strictly follow one particular method*” – but more important was a principled eclecticism based on the students’ background, situation and needs. As he said:

When I teach I teach the students and I teach the subject matter. I teach the human being as well. I see him as a human being and also I give, I provide knowledge.

Eclecticism was also recognised by Sudarat. In her advice to other teachers, she declared it was important to be open to ideas from whatever source and to encourage eclecticism: “*Don’t be ‘anti’ any techniques – ‘Oh, this is not good for Thai people’ – you can adapt any teaching approach, any teaching techniques to use with your students.*” More directly Bandara, in Sri Lanka, worked with the learning strategies offered by his adult students, explaining his method in this way.

I don’t go into the classroom with a very clear teaching plan because if you want students to learn in different ways you need to kind of find a methodology which will be appropriate. I mean, yes, we could pick and choose from books, from the literature but I think it’s a kind of contract or something that the teacher and the students should do together to find the best way. Like even with this group at [name of college], they’re all aspiring young men and women, so on day one what I did with them, with a new group, was, I said “Can we look at the different ways that people of your age learn?” So we had a discussion and then I said “Shall we try and use what you said for the next ten lessons?” and I’ll be doing ten lessons with them. So to me that’s a methodology, a shared methodology.

The teachers’ perspectives discussed here contribute, I feel, to a vision of TESOL classroom practice as a response to the locally-situated needs of the participants (Butler, 2005; Canagarajah, 2005; Mangubhai *et al.*, 2005) and suggest that the TESOL profession needs to acknowledge a richer and more varied picture of classroom life than one sanctioned by official curricula; one in which there is an acceptance that ‘traditional’ forms of instruction persist for a reason, and that to uncover the reason there is a need to investigate the socio-cultural and educational contexts of use of the methods. This is corroborated by Hu’s (2005) finding that the use of particular methods by groups of teachers in China correlated with particular socio-economic and cultural conditions, encompassing disparities in the availability of subject resources, school facilities, the quality of the teaching force vis-à-vis government minimum professional requirements, access to authentic language outside the class and differing views on the value of English in terms of economic and social capital. The research here argues that investigation of socio-cultural and educational contexts in which classroom teaching is enacted is crucial to the understanding of local practices. This understanding will, in turn, contribute to correcting a monolithic view of TESOL based on western conceptions of idealised practice. More research of this kind is, in consequence, needed to enrich our collective understanding of the global practices of TESOL in its many and varied local contexts. I look forward to learning about Malaysian understandings of TESOL throughout the 2nd Teaching and Learning English in Asia International Conference.

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