

# English as a Medium of Instruction in Thai Universities: A Review of Literature

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*Abstract:* - Although many researchers have studied the perspectives on adoption of English as a curricular innovation and compatibility of English as a medium of instruction which mostly take place among language planners, policy makers, educators and researchers, few have examined how the students perceive English-medium instruction and how students' perceptions of English-medium instruction may affect the content learning and learning motivation. The English-medium curricula design has generally failed to use the perceptions and experiences of students. This review of studies addresses about the English as a medium of instruction from students' points of view and explores reasons behind students' perceptions concerning the language of instruction. To this review, language planners, policy makers, educators and researchers will better understand the pros and cons of Thai and English as medium of instruction in Thai universities as well as the relevant factors which influence the perception of medium of instruction. In future, therefore, they can base their decisions of language choice between Thai versus English as a medium of instruction on clear knowledge of popular preferences.

*Key-Words:* - Medium of instruction, Students' perceptions, Higher education, Language and communication

## 1 Introduction

In the world of globalization era, English has increasingly become the medium in every domain of communication. Hence, higher education worldwide has contributed to the crucial role of English in order to meet the growing local, national and international demands for English skills [2] [3] [7] [10] [11] [12] [18] [19].

In Thailand, English is used for the purposes of academic advancement, career advancement, traveling abroad, technology access and economic success [15] [18]. Significantly, Thailand economic growth demands well-trained university graduates to ensure the economic success. One of the significant requirements for future success is proficiency in English. Therefore, a number of efforts have been made to the Thai educational system to improve Thai learners' English performance. However, many survey found that Thai learners had unsatisfactory English proficiency; also the English proficiency level is low in comparison with other developing countries e.g. Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines [2] [4] [12].

Directions and ways to enhance English proficiency of Thai students in using English with their global peers have been perpetually implemented. However, in Thailand, it is extremely difficult for Thai students to master the English language. This is because the

medium of instruction in the classroom is mostly Thai, as many teachers teaching English to Thai students are mainly non-native speakers, leading to the use of unnatural language and creating the failure of genuine interaction in the language classroom [2]. Also, the exposure to English of Thai students is thus somewhat limited. That is why the universities try to replicate English language environment through English-medium instruction [18]. Given the greater options of English-medium programs in Thailand, this review of studies was extended to encompass students' perceptions concerning English-medium instruction which is the important aspect of ongoing changes in Thai higher education. To this review, it allowed a comprehensive study of the factors most closely associated with the core concern of this review.

## 2 English Language Reforms in Thailand

In Thailand, Thai is the official language of the nation and has always been used by everyone in daily communication and education instruction. The Thai language, being used from the beginning, remains the

primary medium of instruction at universities despite the growing dominance of English.

Historically, Thai educational reform era happened with the vision of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in paving the way for the emergence of independence and civilization. English language at that time was assigned to be studied among the royal [9]. The major change occurred in 1921 under King Vajiravudh reign (Rama VI). English became a compulsory subject for students with the objectives of obtaining modern knowledge and people development. Thailand's appropriation of western ways and of the English language had served the country in allowing an equal place on the international scene [15]. After World War II, it was apparent that Western influences could be seen in almost every aspect of Thai life. A great change in the English syllabus was introduced in 1996 when Thailand had to be internationally competitive and need to internationalize educational system for an increasingly intercultural global era. The current English curriculum reform have emphasized on learner-center with the focus on raising the level of students' foreign language skills for social and business situations. As stated in the National Education Reform Act in 1999, Thai students should have global literacy. They must know English and understand cultures of other countries to be qualified as world citizens [22].

The use of English in Thailand is overwhelmingly increasing. The government has long realized the importance of the English language as a major core subject in schools, and it has been a compulsory subject at varying levels. Today, with Thailand's role in the international trade, the English language is needed for Thailand's economic survival. "It is no longer a matter of preference; it is a matter of necessity" [15]. Significantly, English is powerful vehicle for carrying on international business, strengthening the economy and improving technical knowledge.

### **3 Current Situation of English as a Medium of Instruction in Thai Universities**

It is clear that global competitiveness and the needs to meet world challenges are the major key driving English-medium instruction. The educational response in Thailand was to react to external pressures; and attempted to find the best institutional structure for its needs. Indeed, the Thai government effort has made English the major second language in Thailand. Some programs in higher education have been conducted in English for the purpose of increasing English-medium environment. However, for the great majority of students in Thailand, the national Thai language

continues to be the primary language of education and communication.

The term English-medium instruction program, where English is used as the sole medium of instruction, is used interchangeably with the term 'international' program by Thai universities. It was indicated that in 2008, there were 884 international programs for both Thai public and private universities. If taking a look at the number of international programs in the year 2004 which had only 465 programs, it is clearly seen that the international programs had almost doubled the number from 2004 to 2008. If classified in terms of level of study, international master's degree is the highest in number (350 programs), whereas bachelor's degree is the second (296 programs) and doctoral degree is the third (215 programs) [21].

Today, English is the predominant foreign language in Thailand. Virtually all Thai students study English as their first foreign language; the average Thai students receive six years of English instruction during elementary school; and university students are required to study English as compulsory for 1 year. At the university level, English language curriculum has been reformed in order to meet the demand for English language skills. With the importance of English as a world language, the Ministry of Education aims that all university classes in all subjects be conducted in English or adopt English-medium instruction. Therefore, Thai universities offer a wide variety of English-medium programs in many disciplines both at undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition to English proficiency improvement, students gain broader perspectives from adjunct business professionals, overseas experts, and visiting professors. However, research findings indicated the popularity of English-medium programs in Thailand comes from the pressures of current job market and the social value of status. Students are mainly interested in vocational aspects of their studies, and are less motivated to pursue knowledge and the language for its own sake. The majority of Thai students did not take advantage of English communication and cross-cultural benefits that academic and social engagements with international teaching staff offered them [18].

#### **3.1 Role and Significance of English as a Medium of Instruction**

Faced with social-economic pressure, universities, policy makers and educators have been more influenced in shaping decisions over the medium of instruction and are making the change to English medium which is regarded as the most preeminent language of global communication; as the language for pursuing a career in the internationally oriented business worlds and for prospect of educational advancement. In addition, it

becomes apparent that many students who have little or no exposure to English outside the classroom experience considerable benefits in following an English medium academic curriculum. There is opportunity to learn English language both through the use as the medium of instruction in content subjects and in English language class. This enables students to improve their proficiency in English [5].

### **3.2 Adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction**

In Thailand, many universities which formerly operate in Thai only; now open up English-medium program as an option. Some of the programs offer double degrees by collaborating with the world's renowned universities. Some educational programs adopt what is called a 'mixed mode' of learning, that is, teachers use Thai for teaching and English as the medium of textbooks, and written assignments. Major reasons to adopt English-medium instruction are to have good command of English; to effectively communicate with the international community; to efficiently handle future business dealings with their foreign counterparts; to be able to competently use new technologies such as computer and internet which allow them access to a wide range of information; and to acquire further knowledge in their fields [5][18].

### **3.3 Compatibility of English as a Medium of Instruction within Thai Context**

When implanting the foreign language as a medium of instruction program, it is needed to understand and adapt to the real world of local students [1]. When English-medium instruction is introduced, which bear only little relationship to students' previous experience and perceptions, the students undergo 'educational shock' as well as 'cultural shock' [1]. Subsequently, the new medium of instruction may fail to convince students. A major failure cause of English-medium instruction innovation is connected with a lack of understanding the students, the social action, and personnel behavior within the host educational environment. By communicating with the local students as what actually happens and forms of social action in the educational environment will help to correspond with their real perception. English as a medium of instruction in Thai universities is one of the most important innovations in higher education system. It is difficult however to raise student awareness of the implications of an international orientation for day-to-day life. Using English only in lectures did not imply that the university was an English-medium university. English-medium should be enforced at all level, from classroom to social clubs. Participation in English-related social and cultural

activities in everyday communication seems unrealistic. English-medium instruction therefore may be incompatible if it does not fit within host educational environment [1].

## **4 Students' Perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction: A Review of Studies**

Perception is the process of attaining awareness or understanding of sensory information. It is concerned with how events are observed and interpreted. What one perceives is a result of interplays between past experiences, including culture, and the interpretation of the perceived. The developing of person's perception will effect to the performing of a person.

Research about English as a medium of instruction mostly involved the perspectives and views of adopters (MoE, universities), implementers (teachers), suppliers (material writers), change agents (MoE); but seldom addressed the element of student's perceptions despite perceptions of all involved people have been important in streams of research. As long as the preeminent of English language remains significant, we must gain an improved understanding of how English-medium instruction can be best implemented and applied most effectively [17]. 'Successful' implementation of English-medium innovation relies heavily on the perceptions of those involved in the innovation process. Students' perceptions are considered an essential component of English-medium education because their perceptions can influence learning behaviors and achievement; and affect increasing interest of English-medium learning. Discovering students' perceptions about English-medium instruction will help both teachers and students in the teaching-learning process.

Various researchers have shown that English learning requires a significant amount of motivational strategies [11][16][24]. Student motivation is one of the key factors affecting student performance and learning. Among the most important factors that influence the motivation of students are students' interest in the content and students' perceived relevance and benefits of the language—do students have an interest in English-medium and do they believe it applies to them or their future jobs? If students perceive some benefits to their learning, they will likely be more motivated to perform well, to work hard on chosen tasks that enhance their learning and attain their goals.

The five factors which are mentioned below reflect the influences towards student's perceptions of English as a medium of instruction. The first and second – 'Language Proficiency' and 'Language Anxiety' reflect a perception that English-medium instruction and

environment may support or fail to stimulate the rich use of the target language. The third and fourth – ‘Perceived Benefits of Learning English’ and ‘Motivational and Goal Orientation’ direct attention to how the students be motivated or unmotivated. The fifth – ‘Identity Issues’ focuses on the cultural beliefs and personnel attitude regarding pros and cons of Thai and English as medium of instruction.

#### **4.1 Language Proficiency**

As mentioned above, Thai learners had unsatisfactory English proficiency [2][4][12]. Previous research found that students fail to achieve English competency mainly due to insufficiency of communicative language approach and supportive environment; more focus on receptive language skill and knowledge of English grammar for the purpose of examination; inadequate practice on productive language skills; little opportunity to practice English on a daily basis; and lack confidence in using English.

In Thailand, students have not much chance of using English and have not had much feeling of success in their learning experience. Hence, it is necessary to offer the students a supportive environment for improving English, where teachers and students can share a place to use English; to ease students from excessive dependence on the mother tongue; and to raise students’ awareness that English is widely used by non-native speakers around the world; not only the native English [20].

#### **4.2 Language Anxiety and English as a Medium of Instruction**

Anxiety is generally seen as a psychological concept and defined as “subjective, consciously perceived feelings of apprehension and tension, associated with activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system.” Anxiety can be either facilitating or debilitating. Facilitating anxiety motivates learners to adopt an approach attitude and is willing to confront the new learning task. Debilitating anxiety motivates learners to assume an avoidance attitude and therefore tends to escape from the learning task [13]. The factor of teachers’ attitude and evaluation, teacher-students interactions in class, parents’ expectation, classmates’ attitude, students’ own achievement are the potential sources of students’ foreign language anxiety [8].

Foreign language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension associated with the foreign language context. Students with high levels of foreign language anxiety may impact achievement and may exhibit avoidance behaviors such as missing class and postponing homework [13]. Anxiety, regarded as negative motivation can undermine student’s confidence and deter them in using English as a mean of

communication. Contrary, positive motivation notably motive for communicating in English and communication confidence. Therefore, according to Gardner, anxiety is one of the best predictors of foreign language development and interaction with others [16].

#### **4.3 Perceived Benefits of Learning English**

Perceived benefits are defined as beliefs about the specific positive outcomes associated with a specific behavior. It also refers to the extent of individual recognition of the provided relative advantages which are valued by individuals. Identifying students’ perceptions toward English medium can reduce problems for students attempting to comprehend English lectures and help lectures in English to be successful [3].

There are both positive and negative perceptions of learning English. The positive-oriented perceptions of Thai students perceive English proficiency as a language of superiority, power, wealth increase, social prestige and success. English-medium instruction places an advantage over peers educated solely in Thai; support students’ employment prospects; and enhance English communication skills. Positive perceptions of English in Thailand are largely fostered by academics and business leaders to maintain its position as a center for academic advancement and international trade.

On the other hand, the negative-oriented students who may not want to be embarrassed or already put up a mental barrier against English, perceive English in real life as incompatibility; difficulty in learning and such opinions have affected their perception toward speaking English. English makes too much burden when attempting to comprehend their English lessons; English makes them feel uncomfortable interacting with a foreign teacher; and English medium of instruction is not so important for them.

#### **4.4 Motivation & Goal Orientation toward English**

Goal orientation is seen as an aspect of an individual's motivation. The goal orientation in English-medium instruction is to measure motivational orientation toward the value of English language as a mean of daily communication. English goal orientation of a student describes the goals that he/she chooses and the methods used to pursue those goals. According to goal theory there are two dominant achievement related goals for learning: mastery and performance goals [13]. Students who hold mastery goals demonstrate a focus on learning and understanding. On the other hand, students who hold performance goals demonstrate a focus on ability or competence. Within these two goal orientations, students may seek different methods for goal attainment. Mastery-oriented students seek challenging tasks that

they could learn and that their intelligence could be improved through effort [6]. Conversely, if students believed that that intelligence was fixed and not subject to change, they tended to be performance oriented, choosing tasks where they could demonstrate their abilities [6].

Student motivation is a fundamental dimension to predict important educational outcomes including psychological wellbeing and academic achievement. Interestingly, based on Baker's investigation, it was appeared that mastery goals consistently demonstrated positive effects on academic performance and achievement in English [23]. It could be explained that students approaching tasks with a mastery goal employ deep cognitive processing strategies. They may perceive themselves as more capable due to their effective employment of learning strategies and hence positively affect their academic achievement. Performance goals were more often found to relate negatively to English achievement. Instead of focusing on the task, a performance goal oriented individual is concerned with social comparisons and focusing on outperforming peers, which seems to negatively affect their academic achievement [23].

#### 4.5 Identity Issues

Identity is described by a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations. In term of national identity, it can be a mean to follow the tendency or widespread use of English language from the first penetration to the present. It can also assess the impact on the assimilation of English language in Thai culture. National identity can be described as three models: patriotism, nationalism, and internationalism [14]. Patriotism tends to have positive identification with strongly affective attachment to homeland. Nationalism means the belief in national superiority over other nations. Internationalism has the belief and willingness to cooperate with other nations [14].

Selection of a language as medium of instruction is socially acceptable and does not impede Thai unity and lose national identity. However, exploring the structure of student identification should help us understand how students view today's world and respond to English in domestic and international context [14]. Indeed, it can be seen that internationalism perception predicts more positive attitudes toward learning English due to the openness for others. Conversely, the nationalistic students may regard anything that appears unique to their culture and are relatively closed-minded toward foreign countries. They may possess less knowledge regarding international affairs or less exposure to foreign language than do non-nationalistic students. Stronger national identification may generate less positive attitudes toward languages associated with outgroups;

and may not be using English as the medium of communication in their groups

In term of cultural identity, it is important to gain a better understanding of the use of English as a medium of intercultural communication in Thailand and how to manage intercultural communication to the needs of local contexts [18]. Significantly, Thai cultural characteristics have a profound impact on students' perceptions towards practice of international education. Thai cultural nationalism emphasizes the uniqueness of Thai identity, language, culture, and the nation independence. The nationalists with the promotion of Thai language and resistance to foreign influence discourage learning English, whereas the internationalists with its promotion of English language encourage learning English.

However, it may be debated that the English language being used today by Thais is to serve their own objectives, unrelated to the identity issues [15]. English words are adopted along with western life-style; socially accepted and understood. For example, when Thais want to buy some food, they say going to 'supermarket' and 'shopping centers'. On the road, we may hear Thais say 'u-turn' or 'bus lane', instead of Thai words. This represents a cultural challenge for Thai universities and raises questions about the relationship between culture and curriculum development in a globalizing world.

## 5 Discussion & Conclusion

English, nowadays emerges as the predominant medium of international business and academic discourse. English is perceived as the key to the socio-cultural advancement. Policy makers, language planners, educators and teachers in Thailand are intensively addressing the need to increase student proficiency in English language skills. In order to achieve this, over the decade, national policies and syllabuses have been moving towards various versions of language teaching. Adoption of and change in medium instruction in higher education can be seen widely currently; however mostly involve adopters, implementers, suppliers, but the clients or students who are one of major components.

Perception is an important factor in English-medium because it is influential and interferes in learning performance and achievement. Student's perceptions are coming from their insight belief. They could understand and see the value of English-medium instruction in which they could use in their daily lives. However, to provide the appropriate experience in English-medium instruction, the right and new knowledge, creation of good surrounding and environment, and opportunity to practice could enable students the positive perceptions of English language as a medium of instruction.

In view of this study, it is recognized that students' perceptions of English as a medium of instruction cannot be attributed to isolated factors, and that any factors examined must be viewed in context in order to have any meaning. The main goal is to better understand the closely associated factors influencing students' perceptions of English as a medium of instruction; with a view to modifying the English medium more realistic, hence helping the students to become more successful learners in short term, and more effective in long term.

The concerns described in this review may be shared by policy makers, language planners, educators and teachers who move from a teacher-focus to student perception oriented approach in which the students can play a more active role. Possibly further research can continue to an empirical study about students' perceptions of English-medium instruction and how to apply English-medium instruction most effectively to meet the evolving needs of individuals in university.

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