

At what age should Thai kids start learning English?

Introduction

The question, “At what age should Thai kids start learning English? And why is Thai kids’ English weaker than other kids’ in Southeast Asian countries?” was raised to the phones- in by Jor Sor Roi, the information and traffic service radio program on 19 September, 2005. There were a lot of respondents with variety of comments about the age of the kids to start learning English and about why Thai kids are very weak at English.

At present there is not the precise policy of Ministry of Education about the age of kids to start learning English. It depends on the schools’ readiness. Some schools teach kids English in kindetrgarten level but some not. They teach kids English in primary schools. Some schools have adequate teaching Aids, but many schools. Some callers said that it is too early for kids at the age of 3 -4 to learn a foreign language. At that age It should be the time for developing kids’ physical and mental readiness. Kids should begin learning English at around 6-7 years of age in a primary school. They are quite more matured. There were, however, a lot of sayings that kids should start learning English in a kindergarten school. Kids at that age are able to absorb what they have learnt. And it must be the step by step – process, focusing listening and speaking skills with various types of pleasantly interactive activities. According to the theory of language acquisition, it is said that “Language acquisition is the process whereby children achieve a fluent control of their native language. Language acquisition is the result of stimulus – response activities: imitation, repetition, memorization, reward, and reinforcement” (L. Varshney, 1997: 315.). It means that kids are able learn a language and can imitate, remember, repeat, and reinforce that language. This is because Language is part of human’s the inherent faculty; a faculty of speech, or some said ‘it’s God’s special gift.” (L. Varshney, 1997: 1)

By the reasons of Thai kids’ English weakness, some callers said it has got various means: teaching approaches, disqualified teachers, students’ exertion etc. And they said they felt very embarrassed when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations declared that the score of TOEFL of Thai students are only better than Cambodian students; Ahead of Thais were Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Burma, Indonesia, and Vietnam (Bangkok Post). In my opinion, the educatively authorized people of Thailand should urgently solve these problems, especially Thai government. Learning English methods must be one of the most important policies to be educationally reformed. As we have known globalization age is the age of the borderless movement of money, service – products, man and information through high technology. So, people should know all changes of the world. One of the important keys to know the world is English. It is spoken internationally and all knowledge has been transmitted to the world in English and some other languages. To upgrade Thai society to be a knowledge – based society, the English learning and teaching reform is a must.

The causes of problems and the ways out

In my opinions the causes of why Thai students cannot use English communicatively even though they have spent over 10 years learning English can be summarized into two factors:

- (1) External factors;
 - 1.1 learning and teaching methods
 - 1.2 School's readiness
 - School administrator's vision
 - Text, supplementary, and teaching aids
 - Qualified teachers
 - Social circumstance
- (2) Internal factors:
 - 2.1 Learner's readiness
 - 2.2 Learner's exertion

(1) External factors

1.1 Learning and teaching approaches

Jaturon Chaisaeng, Minister of Ministry of Education, after having presided over the seminar titled "the strategy to develop English learning and teaching" said that since the present society has rapidly changed, English is more important for people to know globally occurring information. So, the Ministry of Education has the policy to change an old – fashionable English learning and teaching process used in Thailand for over 50 years; Grammar – Translation Approach and the Communicative Approach would be adapted to use". And Mistress Kasma Voravan Na Ayutthaya, Under – Secretary of Ministry of Education said that English must be a first foreign language that Thai kids must choose to learn. And for the question if Thai kids should start learning English when they are in primary school or not, she said, it depends upon the kids' readiness. A school will not impose them to learn" (Hi-Ed, 2005:27)

a. What is the communicative approach? And how is it used?

"Language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context, and its social, or situational, context" (Margie S. Berns, 1984: 5) So, the real objective of language is for the social communication. As Minister of Education said in the seminar that the communicative approach should be appropriate method for Thai students in learning English and he said he hoped it would improve Thai students' English ability, especially in communicative aspects.

What is the communicative approach? The communicative approach is a combination of different methods, emphasizing the role of the teacher and the students in communicative English as a Second Language class. The communicative approach could be said to be the product of educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the audio-lingual and grammar – translation methods of foreign language instruction.

This approach makes us of real – life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. The real – life simulations change from day to day. Students’ motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. (<http://www.monografias.com>)

The role of the teacher in the communicative classroom will find himself or herself talking less and listening more – becoming active facilitator of their students’ learning (Larsen – Freeman, 1986)

Lado (1997: 33) said that in communicative classroom the listening process reversed, starting with expression as heard in context, followed by recall of content through association between expression and content. Great facility is required also for listening at conventional speed, as is an adequate memory span with attention on the content of what is heard and reading and writing are parallel process to listening and speaking. So, the learner learns a target language by doing role-plays, dramatizations, and demonstration and so on.

b. Communicative language teaching

Through communicative approach the teacher has to set up the exercises, but because the students’ performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as a referee or monitor. A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet, however. The students do most of the speaking and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to compete the task. By this process, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language (English) in general. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning. (Larsen – Freeman, 1986)

c. Why is it suitable for Thai students?

Since we have had an over 100 - year experience learning and teaching English through the grammar – translation approach, Thai students’ English ability as we have known is still unimproved. They are like a person who invests over 10 years doing a business but gets nothing. It wastes time and money.

What is the problem? The problem is that the old English learning methodology emphasizes the rules of English, through that approach the teacher teach them how to write grammatical sentences, explaining variety of functional grammar rules. It is a very inactive English learning. It also bores learners. In dialy communication, people just speak what ever they want to talk to someone. They never be serious on grammar. If they can communicate understandably with a talking partner, that is the achievement. The problem is that having learnt with the so – called process, students lack practicing listening and speaking skills that cause them to lack self-confidence in using English. So, the communicative approach focuses on listening and speaking skills in the real – life situations. The teacher is only a facilitator, not a class controller, and helps students help themselves. I also agree with Minister’s of Education opinion and it should be the problem solution for Thai students’ English ability.

1.2 School’s readiness

- **School administrator's vision**

Mistres, Kasha Varian, Under – Secretary of Ministry of Education said that learning and teaching English comes first for Thai kids but at what age they should start learning English, she said, is upon learners' readiness. A school cannot order them to learn. What she said is divided into two points; the importance of English and age of the learners. In my opinion, English is undoubtedly important but learning English depending upon kids' readiness makes me quite concerned. The reason is that kids are never matured by themselves. Kids are the ones that a certain society has to bring up and grow up the readiness to them both physically and mentally. Since the government policy of what age to learn English is still vague, a visioned school administrator is the blood – key. A far - visioned school principal sets up precise policy that English is used as a second language, and used communicatively both in classroom and out of – class. A school has to provide students with all tools necessary for learning English, suitable for a level of the learners. And the principals must motivate and encourage kids to learn English eagerly and enjoyably.

- The textbook and supplementary

The textbook is also important. It should be a simplified and communicative textbook in full colors with a lot of interactive activities. And the teaching aids and supplementary like video, CDs, movies and other medias are arranged to support in the process of learning English.

- **The qualified teachers**

One of the big problems in improving Thai students' English ability is that in many schools there are not qualified teachers with teaching experience. In some provincial schools, the sport – majored teachers need to teach English. “The qualified teacher” here means to those who got at least B.A. majoring in English and have been teaching English communicatively for some years. The teacher can use English as a media in teaching.

- **Social circumstances**

2. Students' exertion

Raphael Gefen in his article “Teaching English to less – able learners” (ELTJ XXXV NO. Jan. 1981) lists four types of learners – the very able, the able, the less able, and the unable. Learning ability of them is absolutely different. Apart from the effective approach, learning exertion of the learners is the most important. According to Buddhist ideology, a person who hopes to succeed in what he wants must comprise of four virtues:

- 2.1 Exertion (Chanta)
- 2.2 Effort (Viriya)
- 2.3 Thoughtful (Jitta)
- 2.4 Critically consideration (Vimangsa)

It means in doing things difficult or easy one must love to do that, do it with utmost endeavor, while doing it think of every steps or process carefully, and if there is any problem, try to find the cause and effect of each problem and the way out wisely. In my experience, in my English class, apart from a majority of over 80 students in the class, most of all students are the less – able. They had bad background about English. They learn English because it is a compulsory course. They learn it for knowledge for

doing tests, but language learning is skill; that is, one must practice it often and often and use it often and often. But students do not like to do. They just sit take note of what the teacher is teaching. They do not even try to say “ yes, sir” or “ Yes, madam” in response with participation check before class. This is also important cause that makes Thai students be bad at English as complained on Jor Sor Roi Radio. What to do for such a situation.

The arguments of child's language learning

There are two schools; Behavioral Approach and Rationalistic Approach have said significant things about child's language learning, yet neither perfect.

Behavioral Approach	Rationalistic Approach
Language acquisition (1. A.)	
1 L. a. is a result of experience 2. L. a. is a stimulus – response. process. 3. Language is a conditioned behavior.	1. Lea. is a result of condition. 2. Lea. is an innate, born – in 3. Language is not a behavior like Other behaviors but a species – Specific and specie, uniform
mental 1. Children learn languages by imitation application And analogy. 5. Language learning is practice based. 6. Language learning is mechanical. 7 Role of imitation, repetition, reinforcement, Memory, motivation, is very significant In language learning. 8. Language acquisition is the result of nurture.	Process. 4. Children learn language by 5. Language learning is rule based. 6. Language learning is analytic, Generative and creative 7. Role of exposure is very significant. 8. Language acquisition is the result of Nature.

As the two different theories of language learning mentioned above, it glances at different significant points. In my opinion, child's language learning process needs combination of both theories. Language is the result of both experience and condition. It is innate, a newborn process and also needs response – stimulation. A child can imitate, repeat, reinforce, memorize what they have learnt and can expostulate it. And it is the result of the nurture and nature.

At what age should child start learning a foreign language?

“Child can understand comprehensively their mother tongue at the age of 3- 4. And you need not to tell a child. They can find the solution by themselves” (Hesperian. 1904). According to Hesperian, a child aged 3 - 4 is able to achieve their mother tongue understandably. However, the learning process does not just start at this age, but it has started continuously since he/she was a newborn by achieving and observing mothers or maids' often and often repeated sounds that relate to interactive objects or activities. This is so - called an innate or born – in process. And then day after day a native language becomes their inherent faculty and in the long run they can utter that language naturally.

To question about what age kids should learn a foreign language, they also said they should start at the age of 3 – 4. The reason is that kids with that age are quite ready and eager to learn new challenging things but it must be the process of learning together with playing by emphasizing only listening and speaking skills. This process will absorb learners of listening and speaking competence. L. Larceny (1997: 317) said every normal human child learns one or more languages unless he is brought up in linguistic isolation, and learn the essential of his language by fairly little age, say by six. It means that the child aged six is quite more matured to learn in more advanced level, that is, writing and reading skills.

In my opinion as said as respondent through the phone – in program of Jar So Rio, a community traffic service radio on September 19, 2005 at around 10 pomp. I suggested that a child should learn English since they are in the kindergarten school. The reason is the same as it mentioned above. With over 25 years of English teaching experience, I found that Thai students have difficulty of listening skills. They cannot communicate with foreigners because of their bad listening skill, that causes them not to be able to speak. The blind never speak. So listening competence is the most important and should be initially emphasized for young kids. For linguistic isolation and essential of a target language they should start learning when they are in a primary school, with the age of around six.

Why are Thai students weak at English?

As some comments of respondents through Jo Sor Roi, a community traffic service radio can be summarized as follow:

1. Learning and teaching approach Problem
2. Students in exertion
3. Governments' policy
4. Teachers' qualification
5. Teaching Aids

A. Learning and teaching approach problems.

For over a hundred year, in Thailand Grammar translation approach has been used. The teaching method emphasizes rules of a target language. Now it already proves that it has failed. Students may understand how to write grammatical sentences. They, however, cannot use it for communication. “ Language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society”(Berns, 1984: 5). So, the real of objective of learning a language is to interact socially with people. In my opinion, to solve this problem the communicative approach would be adapted to use.

This approach makes us of real – life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. The real – life simulations change from day to day. Students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

The role of the teacher in the communicative classroom will find himself or herself talking less and listening more – becoming active facilitator of their students' learning (Larsen – Freeman, 1986)

Lado (1997: 33) said that in communicative classroom the listening process reversed, starting with expression as heard in context, followed by recall of content through association between expression and content. Great facility is required also for listening at conventional speed, as is an adequate memory span with attention on the

content of what is heard and reading and writing are parallel process to listening and speaking. So, the learner learns a target language by doing role-plays, dramatizations, demonstration and so on.

In my opinion, by this method, Thai students communicative English would be improved. And English learning as Thai society has expected would be better.

B. Students' in exertion

Raphael Gefen in his article "Teaching English to less – able learners" (ELTJ XXXV NO. Jan. 1981) lists four types of learners – the very able, the able, the less able, and the unable. Learning ability of them is absolutely different. Apart from the effective approach, learning exertion of the learners is the most important. For the very able, and the able, if they had an effort and were brought up with effective teaching approaches, they would get advanced rapidly. For the less – able,

When should Thai kids start learning English?

First, the teaching approach, someone said is important. In Thailand the Grammar – Translation approach (learning the language's rules, and learning how to translate from the target language into a learner's mother tongue) has been used traditionally from generation to generation. It already approved it has failed. Learning a language should have learners feel free in using it and let them come over it naturally, so natural method or direct method may be applied for Thai kids.

Second, students' in exertion is the main problem. Mostly students are not enthusiastic to learn, they just come to the class, and do what the teacher tells to do and after there is no any follow – up activities. Some students think that English is like the bitter medicine, their hope is just to learn and get passed the examination..

Third, as we know, in Thailand English is a foreign language, a few of thai people use it for communication, so out – of – class, students have no opportunity to use it at all.

Fourth, the governments' policy about the university entrance test is a big mistake. The reason is that students learn English as knowledge to do the test but learning a language is the language skillll development process. So, learning English is

not only for language knowledge but also for language skills practice. A person who finished learning driving lesson from school doesn't mean he can drive a car smartly.

Fifth, in the remote areas in Thailand, the English teachers cannot speak English fluently and their major subjects were not related to English, some majoring in Sportive science, and so on. This is also the big problems why Thai kids are not interested in English.

The last one is teaching aids. In the world of globalization, high educational technologies have been developed. There are electronic CD roms containig effective English lessons, a lot of internet websites on English lessons but these are not beneficial to the remote schools or even some schools in Bangkok. These teaching aids are very helpful to Thai kids, who even though scarely listen to native speakers, still listen to these aids.

What should we do to solve these problems?

As we have known now Thailand is heading to the knowldge – based society. It is Thai government's policy to develop Thai kids to be internationally thinking people, knowing high technologies and importantly international languages, such as French, Chinese and English. So the English teaching approaches have been rapidly changed from the traditional grammar to some other approaches such as communicative approach, direct method and etc.

The approach in my opinion which is appropriate to Thai kids isn direct method; teaching English to kids naturally.

What is the direct method?

Direct method was as reaction against the grammar – transaltion method. It emphasizes language learning by direct contact with a foreign language in meaningful situations. The cnetral idea of the direct method is the association of words and sentences with their meaning through demonstration, dramatization, pointing,etc. The direct method assumed that learning a foreign language as learning the mother tongue, that is, that exposing the students directly to the foreign language impresses it perfectly upon his mind. (Rado, 1997: 4 – 5). So

So, the language learning process must try to have learners learn a foreign language with the meaningful situation becuase one of the most important principles of teaching is linking the teaching with life (T C Baruah, 1995:170)

In my opinion, Englis leanguage learning process is to have students learn the target language like learning their mother tongue. A new – born learns their mother's language, or actions by observing sounds and actions. Even though at first it doesn't understand but gradually day byday it absorb him or her and he or she can link between sounds and actions together with what he or she wants. And one year later he or she try to utter the sounds with the meanings relating to what he or hse needs. So listening is the first approach for English learners and integrated by speaking. In conclusion, direct method is the process to have the learners:

1. learn English as they learn thier mother tongue.
2. know how to communicate with the target language.
3. kink as the target language, not their mother tongue.
4. stat from listening and speaking, not writing and reading.
5. be with the meaningful situations and
6. curiois to learn.

