

Management of Foreign Teachers in International Educational Institutes in Thailand

¹Phramaha Min Putthithanasombat, ²John Walsh
¹School of Management, Shinawatra University, Thailand
²Director, SIU Research Centre, Thailand
jcwalth100@hotmail.com

Abstract: This paper seeks to determine methods and approaches of managing international English language teachers in Thailand in the context of the forthcoming ASEAN Economic Community. Qualitative interviews, focus group and ethnographic observation were used to obtain data. The research shows that schools involved adopt pragmatic approaches to teacher recruitment and management but retain elements of the longstanding paternalistic Thai approach to management of human resources. The research is limited to two research study sites and to a specific time period. Issues are raised concerning the approach of potential international teachers and the means of obtaining employment. The lack of meaningful preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community in the education sector in Thailand is made evident. Management of international school English language teachers in Thailand has been only lightly researched previously and is partly remedied here.

Keywords: *Thailand, international schools, management, language*

1. Introduction

With the planned launching of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, there is due to be an intensification of cross-border economic integration in the ten members of Southeast Asia (leaving aside Timor Leste) and, in particular, greater freedom of movement across borders for workers in various categories of skilled employment. One of the areas that will be most affected by the AEC in Thailand is likely to be education. Thai skilled workers, who have generally been in short supply since the beginning of the period of rapid industrialisation, are vulnerable to displacement by foreign competitors with equal or lower wage demands and superior English ability. The ability to speak some English is becoming increasingly important in a large number of occupations, particularly those requiring interaction with international stakeholders. Further, since language ability in the labour force as a whole is considered to be low, then Thai workers will find it more difficult to compete in emergent markets. The Royal Thai Government (RTG) is not unaware of these issues, of course, and various ministries have begun to implement policies aimed at dealing with shortcomings. The Ministry of Education, for example, has sought to address the teaching of English in particular both in the classroom and through the management of specialist international English language teachers. Within the classroom, the problems relate to the apparent irrelevance of learning English perceived by many pupils and students and the low level of capacity of many teachers, particularly in rural schools, as well as the lack of teaching infrastructure to support them (e.g. modern audio visual equipment and content, reliable internet access and regular teacher training programmes). Outside the classroom, the problems include the additional expenses of hiring native language speakers to teach English, the casual nature of the work as perceived by the hired teachers, who may only be interested in short-term contracts, as well as cross-cultural communication and behavioural issues which might limit the effectiveness of those teachers.

This paper seeks to make a contribution to reducing these problems by focusing on research aimed at exploring the issues surrounding the management of English language teachers in two international secondary schools in Thailand. It is hoped that the results of this research will be helpful in promoting the efficacy of English language teaching in the Kingdom as a whole and, therefore, to the competitiveness of its labour force with respect to the forthcoming AEC. The importance of this is intensified by the fact that the RTG supports the establishment of English as an official language of ASEAN and, hence, it will be necessary for all officials and executives to be able to deal with the language. Such abilities would also be essential if the RTG is to follow through with plans to become an educational hub in Southeast Asia, especially with regards to tertiary level education and research. The management of foreign teachers has been approached in a variety of different ways, partly because of the different attitudes towards accepting foreigners that can be found. At one extreme, teachers can be considered to be intellectuals who enrich the local environment and should be cherished and treasured (Yan, 2006). A central position involves

treating foreign teachers as equals who require some assistance in becoming adjusted to the necessary local conditions (Wallace, 1991). At the other end, foreign teachers are seen as low-quality inputs, often with little or no training that may be treated almost interchangeably. This can occur in a variety of different contexts (Crookes, 1997). In the case of Thailand, there is a longstanding tradition of welcoming foreign expertise into the Kingdom to enable it to benefit the polity as a whole (Loos, 2006), although this is tempered by the ambiguity affecting Thai attitudes towards outsiders (Harrison, 2010). In this paper, the different power relationships embodied by this spectrum are approached through the lens of culture and Buddhism. The paper continues with a review of the literature relevant to the issues addressed, followed by a description the methods followed to obtain the data and analysis and discussion of the results obtained.

2. Literature Review

Thai Culture: Culture is a contested term both across academic disciplines and within them. In the case of management studies, a pragmatic approach is generally taken so as to avoid such complications and this leads to a definition of culture that offers means of measurement and assessment. A useful definition of culture in this context, therefore, is summarized by Cooke and Rousseau (1988) in the context of organizational culture as “... the shared beliefs and values guiding the thinking and behavioral styles of members.” From the extensive work of Geert Hofstede (e.g. 1984), it has become common within the field of management to accept that culture and cultural values and beliefs can be accurately measured by quantitative means. Thai culture too may be discussed with respect to measurable behaviors and beliefs. Authors who have discussed the culture of Thai people generally refer to such issues as respect (or deference) shown to others, particularly social superiors, the propensity to smile in any situation (referred to in part as fun-seeking behavior) (e.g. Komin, 1990; Pagram and Pagram, 2006; McGill, 1995) and the embrace of the nation-building campaign launched by the military government of the 1950s to define the Thai citizen as one who believed in Buddhism, spoke the central Thai dialect and paid respect to the person and institution of the monarchy (Chaloemtiarana, 2007).

Studies of Thai students in Thai classrooms have tended to focus on this aspect of culture and to search for the manifestation of various forms of behavior as a result (e.g. Deveney, 2005) or of the need to balance longstanding cultural traditions with the new form of economic competitiveness (Witte, 2000) which came to Thailand after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis heralded the arrival of neoliberal thinking at the highest levels of government. Despite a much higher degree of diversity within Thai classrooms than is recognized by this approach to Thai culture, that same approach will be used here, even though it may contribute to the imposition of a hegemonic form of cultural definition that has been contested (Connors, 2005). Within the classroom, expressions of Thai culture are manifested both formally and informally. Formal expressions include the annual *WaiKru* ceremony, during which current and former students bow down in front of their teachers in the traditional *krab* posture and present them with garlands of flowers and other presents. Similar shows of respect to authority figures take place on a daily basis. On an informal basis, Thai culture is evident in the propensity for students to form teams to work on problems and to demonstrate the fun-seeking behavior as a perhaps unconscious means of social bonding.

International Education in Thailand: The Ministry of Education (MOE) identifies 38,347 educational institutions in the Kingdom as a whole (figures are for 2009), with 683,708 teachers and 13,998,328 students (MOE, 2011). Although just 4.0% of all institutions are located in the Bangkok Metropolitan area, they contain 12.5% of all Thailand’s teachers and 15.6% of all the country’s students. The International Schools Association of Thailand (ISAT) lists 95 members, 57 of which (that have addresses listed) are located in Bangkok, which is equal to 60.0%. Most of the other remaining schools are located in parts of Thailand where skilled and professional foreign workers tend to live (e.g. Chiang Mai and the more up market residential areas close to the industrial sectors of the Eastern Seaboard) (ISAT, n.d.). International schools exist in various age ranges and some cover kindergarten to university entrance ages. Some are linked with often prestigious private sector schools in overseas countries, some exist primarily to provide comparable levels and styles of education to the children of overseas professional that they would receive in the home country (e.g. Japan and Korea) and some have overtly religious purposes and goals. It is evident, therefore, that international schools are clustered into particular geographical areas for reasons of appealing to specific market segments. Parents of Thai children who send them to international schools do so in the expectation not only that they will obtain superior language skills, extra-curricular opportunities and the personal confidence and self-development that will facilitate access to a prestigious international university but also that they will be mixing with the offspring of high-ranking and high

social-class parents. They obtain these benefits at high cost, since tuition and other fees are many multiples of the school fees required in other institutions. This is because international schools are run as businesses as well as educational institutes (MacDonald, 2006) that have undoubtedly high levels of expenses and which cater to a segment of the population which either has extensive discretionary income or else the expectation that an employer is prepared to meet educational expenses. The Thai MOE has sought to redress inequitable access to high-level international education by providing subsidies to schools which are able to hire native English language speakers to teach. However, the amounts provided (at 10,000 baht per month per school or approximately US\$300) are very low compared to the resources available in the international sector.

The system thrives in a world in which globalization processes have contributed to an international consensus that education is a vital part not just of competitiveness at a national level but also at an individual level (Larsen and Vincent-Lancrin, 2002) and, consequently, that investing in education for individual young people will reap financial dividends in the long-run. It has certainly been long accepted in Thailand that access to high quality educational institutions is vital not so much to achieve learning objectives but to come into contact with well-connected individuals and institutions of considerable importance in moderating the subsequent career trajectory (Fry, 1980). In the context of international education, some Thai students can struggle to adapt to the different classroom conditions. Deference and respect are inculcated from an early age and this leads to passivity in the classroom and, indeed, later in the workplace, which can be antithetical to what is, required (Deveney, 2005). Other learned behaviors, such as prizing harmony above debate and placing teachers and their words above critical examination are also areas that need to be re-learned.

Management of Teachers and Educational Institutes: As business enterprises, international schools are run according to the normal management techniques associated with running for-profit enterprises, albeit with certain unusual characteristics resulting from the nature of the activity. This includes the distribution of management to quite junior levels in the classroom. Teachers are directly in contact with the indirect customers, the students (their parents or guardians are generally the direct customers who make the consumption decisions) and so greatly affect customer satisfaction. It is possible to try to control all actions of the teacher through applying Theory X or else give teachers the latitude of Theory Y (McGregor, 1960). In general, the ethos of a modern international school tends towards permitting latitude and some expression of professional creativity in the classroom that is to some extent consistent with the management model of distributed leadership (Gregory, 1996). However, this latitude must be balanced by the need for standardized testing at various ages and the constraints this places on teacher innovation and creativity (e.g. McNeil, 2000) and on the vulnerability that teachers and schools have when being blamed for social issues over which they have little if any control (Apple and Teitelbaum, 1986).

Nevertheless, quite intensive research has been conducted into the ways that students learn (see for example the synthesis of Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1993) and how, therefore, classroom management should best take place. This has led to a situation in which the roles of teachers have become quite accurately located within the understanding of how learning best takes place and, therefore, the creation of various prescriptive sets of measures that teachers should adopt and, hence, provide frameworks with respect to which managers can set expectations of teachers and assess their performance (e.g. King and Newman, 2001). Irrespective of this, much of Thai management remains deeply affected by the paternalistic style that is often associated with Southeast Asian management and the influence of overseas Chinese management styles (Kamoche, 2000; Westwood, 1997).

3. Methodology

The Case Study Approach: A comparative case study approach was employed in which important stakeholders from two prominent international schools in Thailand were invited to participate in qualitative interviews. Semi-structured questionnaire agendas were prepared in advance for each category of stakeholder, although each interview was designed to be a conversation in which participants were encouraged to explore of particular relevance to them and to spend less time on issues of lesser import.

The Sample: A total of 25 interviews were conducted during March, 2012. Each interview involved extensive note-taking for subsequent transcription and both Thai and English languages were used.

Participants were selected through a combination of convenience and snowballing techniques; to avoid possible bias from an overly homogeneous sample, respondents were selected where practical in line with the principal of maximum diversity. Participants in the interviews included executives, foreign language teachers, Thai teachers, parents and students,

Analysis: Recognised methods of content analysis were employed to interrogate the primary data, which were considered part of a database along with collated secondary sources, academic journal papers, official reports and so forth. In addition to the personal, in-depth interviews, a focus group was also conducted and ethnographic study of management principles in action has been taking place for some months.

Limitations: The research is of course limited in terms of both space and time, in addition to scope, and these factors should be borne in mind when considering the extent to which the results might be considered generalisable.

The Research Sites: For the case studies, two contrasting institutions within the category of international schools in Thailand were selected: the Darunsikkhalai School for Innovative Learning and the Dhammakaya English Learning Centre.

Background of the Darunsikkhalai School for Innovative Learning: The Darunsikkhalai School for Innovative Learning (DSIL) is a non-profit, bilingual (English-Thai) K-12 school located in the main campus of King Mongkut's University of Technology at Thonburi, Bangkok. The school was launched with the primary goal of providing learners with the opportunity to benefit from constructionist educational methods. The constructionist approach was devised by MIT Media Lab Professor Seymour Papert as a learner-centred, project-based learning methodology. The DSIL sought to incorporate this approach in a setting in which the dignity of individual children is recognized by allowing them to select their own projects for individual study. The school also claims to place special emphasis on English language, technology, personal development, morality and Buddhist meditation to promote mindfulness. The DSIL features mixed-age classes in which project-based learning takes place according to the selections of the pupils themselves. They are actively involved in structuring classroom activities as they interact with each other and the teachers in completing their projects. There are 80 students in the school, divided into three groups: new learners; intermediate learners and advanced learners. Membership depends on familiarity with and success in using the pedagogical method rather than age. Promotion into the next category depends on a 360 degree concept involving test scores; self-assessment; voting by peers and personal interview. Assessment by teachers is based on three or four individual and group projects per term (50%), language proficiency (Thai and English) (30%) and sport, art and other topics (20%).

Teachers generally act as facilitators and resource people to help the students achieve the project-led goals they have set for themselves. There is, therefore, very little in the way of lecturing or teacher-centred pedagogy. Each term ends with student presentations of their various projects. Each project will have been assisted by at least two teachers, one Thai and the other a non-Thai English language teacher who, together, help ensure progress is being made in both languages. This includes the creation of weekly plans and brainstorming methods to help draw mind maps. Additionally, preparations take place each term for a field trip. Clearly, a teaching programme of this nature requires commitment from teachers to help make classrooms creative and productive; students are likely to benefit considerably from long-term interactions with teachers whom they trust and who are familiar with their educational career. The teachers are also required to be technology-literate, as the school prides itself on its one-to-one student-computer ratio and the benefits students obtain from this technology. Since teachers are expected to keep up-to-date with this technology, this indicates a degree of mutual commitment between employer and employee will be necessary.

The Dhammakaya English Learning Centre: The Dhammakaya English Learning Centre (DELC) exists to help to teach English to people who will then be involved in the propagation of Buddhism and its Dhamma (scriptures). The teaching of English is required, therefore, to be systematic in nature and to enable the student to communicate in English in a range of different situations. This is done in a way that supports the organization's overall aim to spread the knowledge of Buddhism internationally. The teaching is divided into various stages. When teachers are recruited, they are classified as the result of initial interviews as either Thai or foreign teachers and as either full-time or part-time. A team of experts prepares the curriculum and teaching materials which cover such skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing, in six levels from beginner to advance. Students are allocated to the different levels according

to their level of proficiency, which is assessed via placement tests. These simple tests take place before learning begins and, for those students aiming to join at intermediate level or higher, an additional personal interview is also required. There are always somewhere between 6-12 students in each class. For levels 1-3, only Thai teachers are used, apart from some supplementary pronunciation classes, which are taught by a native speaker. Foreign teachers are used for levels 4-6. Students may move into the next higher level by passing the requisite examination and, to move up more than one level, should also retake the placement test. Terms last for three months before the final examination takes place. Students receive individual progress reports and suggestions as to how they may improve their language skills from their teachers in addition to being informed of their test results. In addition, DELC arranges English courses for specific purposes in order to enable students to apply their knowledge of English to work and duties in support of promoting Buddhism in a tangible way. This is in line with the principal organizational goal.

4. Findings

The main findings of the study are summarized in three areas, which are cultural differences, teaching qualifications and the nature of the development of the Thai education system.

Cultures Differences: Problems and Solutions: Both schools had the same approach to minimizing potential cultural differences in the workplace, which was to select teachers very carefully with respect to such aspects as personal habits, educational background, career intentions with respect to teaching, comments from others and the presence of a genuine love of learning. All foreign teachers subsequently hired were characterized, therefore, as being friendly, tolerant, generous and respectful. The DSIL approach is to solve cultural issues through employing both Thai and western methods and attempting to form a synthesis of both approaches. For example, the interpersonal respect embedded in Thai culture is combined with the punctuality and commitment to duties evident in western cultures. However, owing to its organizational purpose, DELC has a somewhat different approach which is to acknowledge the importance of all cultural traditions but to seek ways in which new teachers can truly understand and appreciate Thai culture and adjust themselves to working in a truly Thai-style environment. The two schools adopt different approaches to the orientation of newcomers to Thailand and Thai culture. DSIL trains its teachers to work collaboratively in the school almost straight away and that means working together with Thai students and teachers. Since some of the foreign teachers there are former exchange students in Thailand, they generally have some awareness of the basics of Thai culture.

The DELC approach is rather more formal, in that it provides a specific course that newly-arriving teachers must take, which covers many aspects of Thai culture and which can be extended from the normal few months up to a year-long, if the teacher so desires. Both schools believe that cross-cultural working is essential for them to achieve their goals and consider communication to be the central issue. That communication should be based on trust because there are likely to be language barriers from time to time and it is important to believe the best about the other when misunderstandings occur. While both schools understand the importance of tolerance and mutual knowledge in communications in the workplace, the way this is manifested differs. In the DSIL, the focus is on the teaching concept and the cooperative relationship between foreign and Thai teachers, since it is believed that if this is properly in place then the foreign teachers will be making sure they know enough Thai language and culture. Meanwhile, at the DELC, there is a deliberate attempt to make sure that foreign teachers have learned enough language and culture that they can operate effectively within the organization. In general, foreign teachers at both institutions are expected to understand, appreciate and abide by traditions of Thai culture while they are at work and on every occasion on which they are representing their institutions.

Recruiting Foreign Teachers: There are three principal issues to consider when seeking to recruit foreign teachers: their qualifications, their willingness to teach and commitment to education and, thirdly, ensuring the requirements of the Ministry of Education are congruent with the needs of the school and the length of time it is desired to hire the foreigner. In terms of DSIL, potential teachers will be contacted (or they may make contact first) up to eighteen months before graduating from a reputable or prestigious university. Assessments will be made about the emotional maturity and family background of the potential teacher, who will also be asked to demonstrate willingness to become a great teacher through having helped society or schools in a voluntary capacity. For the DELC, meanwhile, the focus is on the candidates' previous education. The administrators prefer candidates with at least two years' of teaching experience and will test this in the application process, during which candidates are required to prepare lesson plans and give a teaching demonstration in addition to the normal interview. DSIL candidates are

expected to be more all-round educators than those for DELC because they will be straight away integrated into the project-learning method employed in the school. Although the new teachers will work in conjunction with a more experienced colleague with each group of 4-6 students, they will nevertheless be called on to share knowledge in a range of different subject areas. By contrast, the focus at DELC is on English language specifically and the content is determined by the religious aims of the institution. In this case, specific assistance may be provided for particular issues of vocabulary and specialized concepts. In terms of the length of contracts, this also varied in the two schools. In the DSIL, contracts are for a minimum of a year and a half and subsequently timed for the completion of the term projects. In the DELC, the length of service is based on the length of each course. In both cases, care is taken to ensure that teachers continue to work until the end of the specific teaching assignment. This is quite common in international schools.

Development of the Thai Educational System: International schools are very popular among parents in Thailand because they exude confidence in the international level of educational standards that they provide. Bilingual schools are the schools of choice for those parents who wish their children to speak English well but not to forget their Thai heritage and culture. As the aspirational Thai middle class continues to expand, therefore, so will the demand for international school places also increase. The forthcoming AEC is also spurring demand for international teachers for all parts of the educational system because of the threat of incoming skilled workers and the possibility of exporting skilled workers throughout the ASEAN region. The increased demand for teachers has led to some increases in salary, particularly in the case of those teachers with specific and desirable qualifications. The two schools have addressed this issue in different ways. DSIL, for example, focuses on family issues and the university from which the candidate has graduated. Cost savings are considered within the context of ensuring that potential candidates meet these criteria so that the quality of teaching remains at the required level. For the DELC, the professed policy is to pay whatever is required to obtain the highest level of potential from a candidate. This is based on the belief that high standards of teaching will result in better qualified students more able to meet the organizational goals and better spread the word of Buddhism. Consequently, cost is considered to be of secondary importance if outstanding candidates are available.

Representatives of both schools acknowledged the importance of the forthcoming AEC and both believed that it would lead to the liberalization of employment within their schools and indeed the education sector as a whole. It is anticipated that this will lead to the much freer cross-border movement of English speaking teachers and that it will accelerate the progress towards English as the international language of ASEAN. English is already the language of business and of international education but it may become the official ASEAN language and this will open up many new areas of demand for English language teaching. As in any example of change, this represents both opportunity and threat for the schools. The threats are principally to the Thai teachers and any others who cannot adapt to the more competitive market conditions and the opportunities mostly accrue to the international English-speaking teachers who can move more easily around ASEAN. In any case, the changes mean an opportunity to restructure and improve the Thai education system so that it better meets the new needs and expectations placed upon it. Overall, both schools are optimistic that the AEC will bring about improvements to teaching in Thailand because it will mean more and higher-quality English language teachers being available. The improvements will come about not just from the newly-available teachers directly but also because of their interaction with local educators, who will have the chance to learn from best practice demonstrated by those teachers.

Discussion: The two schools have adopted pragmatic approaches to achieving the style of classroom activity and teacher management that they require. Those approaches are conditioned by organizational goals and seem to flow from them appropriately. The teachers are expected to contribute to the attainment of these goals and objectives but are not given much power in establishing or improving them. Teacher recruitment and contract negotiations are largely conducted in the context that English language teachers are peripatetic in nature and have few long-term career objectives. This is despite the fact that part of the recruitment process, for DSIL at least, involves identifying potential candidates some time in advance of appointment and, for both schools, quite extensive interviewing and reviewing processes. Teachers who might wish to demonstrate their loyalty and interest in the position and hope to develop a long-term career path are hindered by the relatively short-term contract system which is, nevertheless, prevalent throughout Thailand and beyond.

The DELC diverges from the normal management methods of an international school in that its principal focus is not on profitability but, instead, aims to educate people capable of spreading the Buddhist philosophy in the wider world. However, there seems to be no provision concerning providing incentives other than professional satisfaction to teachers to produce more effective student graduates. Indeed, it seems as if the curriculum and teaching methods are quite well fixed and there is little scope for teachers being able to influence workplace conditions. There seems to be some incongruity between recruiting teachers from prestigious universities who are, presumably, capable individuals and not then entrusting them with creating the classroom experience, at least in part. However, it is certainly true that both DSIL and the DELC have uncovered and put into practice methods of ensuring that the new teachers they recruit are of a suitable quality and with proper qualifications to complete the jobs they take. From the cultural perspective, both schools have established quite strong cultural ambience in the classroom and expect (with suitable assistance) teachers to adapt themselves to working in and with that ambience. In the case of DSIL, problematic Thai classroom behaviors of deference and passivity are challenged in a non-threatening manner by using the group project approach. In this case, a synthesis of international best practice and typical Thai forms of behavior is the goal. Meanwhile, the DELC requires incoming teachers to value and appreciate the cultural norms of Buddhism wholeheartedly. This conditions the means by which classroom management can take place because many forms of personal behavior that have come to be accounted as part of Thai traditions have been folded into Buddhist practice and are beyond criticism.

5. Conclusion

The research has indicated different ways in which Thai international schools approach management of teachers and the use of cultural norms in the classroom and the broader workplace of the school. They have done so in ways which are pragmatic and congruent with organizational goals but which are not, even so, entirely free from the taint of paternalism that has been prevalent in much of Thai management. Whether the onset of the AEC brings about the changes that some have claimed for it in terms of new recruitment and management patterns remain to be seen and, also, the extent if any to which these changes have an impact on management styles remains to be seen. Further research in these areas is required to determine the nature, if any, of change in the Thai international schools sector. It is expected that the total number and scope of such schools will increase because of both supply and demand factors. This will affect the requirements of schools within the sector as a whole and the quality of the teaching provided therein. Both the DSIL and the DELC have features which can contribute towards the further development of the sector and their attitudes towards the interaction between local and international cultural aspirations and expectations will help shape the treatment of teachers in the Kingdom in the next stage of its development.

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