

Cyber-learning: Thai university uses new media tools to teach English more effectively

When school started this year, students at the Pre-College (PC) Program in a Thai university located in the outskirts of Bangkok were not sure what exactly to expect from their classes. Neither did their teachers. This year was one of change for everyone, as the PC Program of Mahidol University International College (MUIC) is starting to implement its new curriculum.

"On our first day, after hearing our teacher explain to us what we would do at PC, most of us in class thought 'Yak makleoy!' (Difficult, very difficult)," said one PC newcomer, code-switching between Thai and English.

"The greatest challenge apparent to me right away was in providing support for teachers by way of effectively communicating the goals of the new curriculum as well as providing training in the new teaching methods that would be used," said Cindy Stewart, a Pre-College Program old-timer and current TOEFL Coordinator.

When talks about revamping the PC curriculum circulated last year, people in the division had mixed reactions. Some were downright enthusiastic about it, hoping for more positive changes to the students' academic performance in general. Others were barely receptive. A few tried to hit the middle ground.

Despite this, the lead person of the curriculum makeover remained confident. "Change in education invariably creates fear and resistance, and there has been very little buy-in at the initial stages," Edward Rush, the Program Director remarked. Rush said he "very much

wanted to place values and knowledge construction at the heart of the new program." He believed it extremely important for the PC Program to mirror advances happening in various educational institutions worldwide.

The idea of repackaging program offerings to address the Thai learners' actual needs has not only been felt and recognized by educators of MUIC, the country's leading higher education institution for the past two consecutive years.

Realizing the role of the English language in the pre-dominantly Buddhist country, parents and Thai educators alike recognize the need to rethink the way English is taught to allow the younger generation to cope with the ever-increasing demand for a high proficiency in English.

English proficiency

Arunee Wiriyachitra, a Thai researcher who looked into the English language teaching-learning situation in the country, noted that a good number of Thai companies realized the importance of both technological innovations and the English language as a language of the business world.

However, Wiriyachitra claimed that some factors which Thailand takes pride on, such as not having been colonized and using Thai as the only official language, also have an effect on how English is used. "Thais' level of English proficiency is low in comparison with many countries in Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore)," Wiriyachitra noted.

In a study that was presented in a 2010 conference in Hong Kong, Perez-Amurao discovered that students found inferential questions in a reading test difficult because of their poor vocabulary and limited world knowledge.

In yet another report, Wisaijorn said that the Thai learners' low English proficiency can be attributed to the country's lack of a strong reading culture, even in its mother tongue. Charoenwongsak deduced that the Thai students' weak reading ethos can be deeply rooted in the social culture of the country much felt in many Thai classrooms. Excessive emphasis on social conformity makes students become very passive, afraid of asking even the most relevant questions about their readings.

To help address this, the new PC curriculum of the international college of Mahidol University was developed.

Four challenges

Dr. Paul Wadden, from the International Christian University, one of the committee members who helped re-examine the old PC curriculum, enumerated four big challenges to curriculum reform which he expected PC to be facing.

The first is being able to arrive at a "unified and overarching system of educational aims" suitable to PC. The second challenge is developing "on a program by program or level by level basis the actual outcomes." The third has to do with getting the PC lecturers involved, which can be "a slow and frustrating process." Lastly, it entails ensuring that "outcomes are really fulfilled."

Almost a year now since changes have been introduced, one can easily sense that the atmosphere surrounding the on-going curriculum alteration has changed.

"When I began teaching PC2 Writing... I worked hard to try to assimilate the new goals and philosophy before the quarter started," Cindy Stewart said. "After much practice, I was able to handle the Google Docs part of the teaching and could see the value for students and teachers in having a 'permanent' record of the students' process writing," she added.

Johnny Griffiths, PC 2 Coordinator, thought the biggest challenge was establishing "some momentum for the new curriculum....[with] a lot of resistance to the changes...I was pleased to see what I believed would be an overall improvement being made."

The only educational platform of its kind across Thailand, MUIC's renewed PC Program now offers a fresh approach to the teaching-learning of English. It now includes subjects that not only allow them to have a good grasp of the English language in the spoken and written forms, but also use it in the most practical sense. PC 3 students now have a better understanding of and appreciation for their intended majors because their term paper topics are interlocked with their future courses and international issues.

Technology-driven

The new curriculum heavily relies on technology, making learning more modernized and efficient. For each level, a student website has been created through which students can have access to educational tools, links, and other information crucial to their education. On each

website, students learn what objectives are to be achieved, compelling them to be more conscious of their performance. Sample tests are also provided, making learners more aware of how they will be assessed. With the process approach to writing officially introduced, the use of Google Docs, where the written outputs at various writing stages are done and saved to for accessibility, is maximized.

With Google technology, the students experience writing the way it is done in an authentic context. The students' peer editors and teachers can always comment on the student-writer's paper, allowing for a collaborative process approach.

Students' blog

The same technology is made instrumental in facilitating another PC requirement, the student's blog. Using Google's Blogger, students write blog entries which form part of their term project. Their subscription to and use of Google News Alerts ties in a number of their classroom tasks as blog entries are about their reaction to current affairs stories they had read. A twin website for teachers outlining the theoretical backbone of the new curriculum and archiving relevant teaching materials and documents now exists.

Griffiths believes "[I]t is essential that curricula are updated to reflect and respond to extremely fast-moving technology.... to stay in touch with learners and make sure ideas are presented in a way that allows connections to be made."

Of course, it is not until the new PC 4 curriculum is launched early next year and the results of the program assessed later on can one claim that the transformation is all-encompassing.

As Dr. Wadden said, all this is a "'long march', not a short walk." Nonetheless, having a glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel looks promising after all.