

THE CONTINUING NEED FOR COMMUNICATION TRAINING IN THAILAND

By Ben Horgan, Senior Programme Manager at Language Express/Corporate Training Express

Several years ago, I was working as a TEFL (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) trainer, preparing expats to become English language teachers to work in schools and language centres around Thailand. Several factors led to fluctuations in the number of new trainees on an individual course. One type of deadly flu or another hitting the news, changing exchange rates, developing markets in neighbouring countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam to name a few. But generally speaking, the market was considered to be booming.

Indeed, this continues to be the case, research by the British Council shows that English is spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide and that by 2020, they forecast that two billion people will be using it – or learning to use it. Nevertheless, several questions would often be raised in our training sessions about the future of language learning - and therefore teaching - in Thailand.

I was often asked whether I thought that the ‘EFL bubble’ in Thailand would burst, as Thai children became more exposed to English in schools and popular culture. My manager at the time pointed out that this at least would probably not happen in his lifetime and I remember wagering to the new trainees that this would likely apply to us, too.

Sadly, this seems to be the case. The EF English Proficiency Index ranks Thailand at 56 out of 72 countries around the world, and number 15 out of 19 Asian countries. In a separate study Thailand was described along with only 5 other countries listed as having a very low proficiency workforce.

There was added fear that the introduction of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, allowing the free movement of skilled labour, would affect Thailand’s ability to compete in the job market. Indeed, the Department of Employment recently announced that there are a total 1,380,349 workers from Asean countries in Thailand taking jobs in teaching, management, engineering, architecture and business.

While this may not sound like good news for some of my old trainee teachers, we are noticing trends which might suggest that this increase in diversity, and workplace competition is pushing Thai employees to develop their language and communication skills.

We have been running our language centre in Phloenchit for over 7 years and have run numerous communication training programmes for businesses in Bangkok. The demand was so great that in 2015 we launched a Corporate Training focused company, so as to deal more effectively with this

market. Already this year, we have conducted English proficiency testing for around 400 Thai employees for inclusion in business communication training.

The unfortunate truth, however, is that, of all of the people we have seen so far this year, only around 20% of them have an English proficiency higher than A1 or A2 relating to the Council of Europe's Framework of Reference and could only be described as being basic as opposed to independent or proficient users of English.

The good news is that, while the general level of English in the workforce still needs to improve, we are noticing a greater level of diversity and an increasing level of skill and professionalism in the clients we deal with. At management level and

above we are often dealing with a mixture of expatriate and well educated Thai staff with a greater proficiency in English. Probably because of the increasing number of Thai students graduating abroad or from bilingual or international schools. As a result, we are benefiting from an increasing demand in soft skills and cultural communication training.

In short, things are improving, but there's a long way to go before that bubble bursts.

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