

In My OPINION

Textbooks: One size does not fit all

Publishers and textbook writers need to work with governments to provide the best course books for our students

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Having returned from the recent Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (Tesol) conference in Khon Kaen, I set about my tasks with renewed vigor and anticipation of what this school year is going to bring.

This lasted for about thirty minutes and then reality set in, and I started to realize that all the conferences in the world are not going to solve the English language difficulties that face Thailand. Thai people must lead the way, especially Thai teachers of English.

If you ask teachers which problem areas need attention, the answers would be too many to summarize in this newspaper column. Therefore, I will focus on course books used in Thai schools and the role publishers can play.

Take the lead from other countries

In Korea, for example, course books are standardized throughout the country. I find this idea particularly appealing as some course books used in Prathom and Mattayom classrooms today are not up to the standard required. Just have a look at your own children's books and see for yourself.

I am of the opinion that course book writers are professionals and must work full time to produce the desired outcomes demanded by the marketplace. Now is the time for Thai teachers of English to demand that course books comply with the Thai curriculum, and use Thai contexts to teach the relevant information. In that way our students will have a better understanding of how English is used in a real Thai context.

This in itself is not an easy task, as it requires books to be developed in line with the existing curriculum and for the future changes that Thailand will face. It is not easy to write a course book, even for one course. Part of the entry requirements for being considered for the position of assistant or associate professor in some government universities is that teachers submit a course book to be used during the course.

Writing a course book has always seemed a mystery to me as they all look professional and glossy; however, they never cater to my students as the subject matter seems way off the mark. Students in Thailand are interested that Liverpool play football at Anfield (for the moment anyway); they do not care about Paul McCartney, not unless he performs a duo with Linkin Park.

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Center has recently published a series of five grammar books that are specifically designed for Singapore and neighboring countries. Subjects include talking about things, actions, time and place, others and lengths.

These books are definitely Singaporean-specific, which should come as no surprise because it was made with the collaboration of the Curriculum Planning and Development Division of the Ministry of Education in Singapore.

Government help with publishers

At national and international conferences, there are always publishers with their latest materials eager to advertise their wares to an unsuspecting public. Some are viewed with suspicion as it is deemed that they are only in it for the money.

As a business, money plays an important part; however, I have been in discussions with certain publishers about my own projects for the training of Prathom teachers of English in the Isaan region, and I have found that some are very cooperative and helpful. A business must make a profit; though many publishers see themselves as providing a service.

With this in mind, I am of the opinion that it would not take much to get teachers, course book writers, publishers and government officials around a table to discuss a series of course books that could be used nationally in our primary and secondary schools to improve the English language use of our students. All have an important part to play and will depend on each other.

For this to work, it will take the leadership of strong-minded Thais and the belief that English is not a second or foreign language in Thailand.

Government officials and educators need to understand that English is an essential tool for workers to do their job properly and compete with others on a level footing in a global world.

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