"English Language Education beyond the Year 2000:
The Shape of Things to Come"
Inaugural and Keynote Addresses delivered by
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at the International Conference on
"Expanding Horizons in English Language Teaching"
organized by Chulalongkorn University Language Institute
in honour of
His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's Golden Jubilee Year
November 27, 1995

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I accepted to take part in this important event, not only because the theme of the conference is a challenging one, but more so because it provides me with an opportunity to associate myself with Chulalongkorn University and the distinguished audience in commemorating the rare occasion that happens probably only once in one's lifetime – the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of His Majesty the King's Accession to the Throne. The entire nation rejoices, and Chulalongkorn University has held, and will be holding, several events as part of the celebrations.

It is only natural that a premier seat of learning such as Chulalongkorn University would focus attention on an academic subject, and one with resounding futures overtones. It is gratifying to know that in tune with the ever-increasing momentum of the globalization process, the Language Institute wishes to look towards the horizons where nations will converge, thereby making it imperative for peoples from diverse linguistic backgrounds to be able to communicate in a World language which is mutually understandable. In so doing, no nation will be at a disadvantage by having to rely on translation or interpretation, that is to say, through a third party, in an International setting. Even if translation or interpretation is available, the rapid response time demanded in many International situations would make the mode of translation and interpretation inadequate and inefficient.

As I understand it, the organizers of this conference are searching for "VISIONS" – a term which nowadays is becoming the in-word. Usually one talks about political visions, economic visions, social visions, etc., in the context of national development. The task before us to-day, however, is more concentrated on the attainment of knowledge by individuals. In the topic "Expanding Horizons in English Language Teaching", we are challenged to forecast the content, the learning and teaching, of a single language, English, in the years beyond 2000 – which actually starts only five years hence.

I must mention at the outset that I am not a linguist. In fact my school experience was that English was not my forte. Although I attended a missionary secondary school, at the time when it was generally taken that missionary

schools provided better opportunities for English or French learning in Thailand, I did not particularly enjoy English lessons. Moreover, I found out later, when I first had to apply my theoretical learning into practice in an academic setting in England, the citadel of the "Standard English", that the English I had learnt at school was quite inadequate.

I understand that the audience today consists mainly of English language instructors and researchers from several countries. This conference, therefore, provides an excellent opportunity to exchange country experiences and pool together expertise in English language education. Our Thai instructors, in particular, have a good chance to learn from fellow English language instructors from other countries whether problems are similar, what their strategies and implementation plans are to cope with those problems, to ensure that future generations would find English language learning more enjoyable, and that what is learnt is truly functional in real life today and in the years to come. Let us unite our efforts and have a good look at this important area of learning, which is of great significance, academically and professionally, as well as in the domains of economic, social and even cultural developments, for our future World, a World without frontier, a World with International understanding.

I have the pleasure to declare the International Conference open, and wish it success in its undertakings.

The conference organizers intend to make full use of the limited time available for the conference, which I endorse. I have therefore been asked, and I agreed, not to leave this podium to take a deep breath, but to continue to share my personal views and concerns on the topic entitled English Language Education Beyond the Year 2000: the Shape of Things to Come.

The reason behind my choice of this topic is quite simple: it does not require linguistic specialization or first-hand teaching experience, of which I have none. As a product and user of English language education, and not the producer, I can avoid "teaching fish how to swim", as the Thai saying goes, which is equivalent to "carrying coals to Newcastle", since this is a gathering of English language instructors who are more knowledgeable about methodology, process, content, assessment, etc., of teaching-learning than I. But being at the receiving end, I can perhaps air my views and offer suggestions for improvement of future products, in the light of emerging trends.

English language, whether one likes it or not, is here to stay. In order to substantiate my personal prediction of "the shape of things to come", it may be useful to look back at the English language in the past, how it leads to the present, which in turn offers directions into the future. Before proceeding further, let me mention that predictions cannot be completely accurate; more so when such predictions involve human activities, in this case, attitudes, commitments, interests, of human beings, learners and instructors alike. Also these predictions are being made at a time when change is accelerating at a rate greater than at any other time in human history.

English as a World language is a comparatively recent phenomenon. In fact in the sixteenth century, the language was confined to England and Southern Scotland, and not yet having penetrated much even into Ireland or Wales, let alone into the World beyond. The number of English speakers began to increase at the time of the Industrial Revolution, when there was a growth of population in England itself. Concurrently, English spread itself into the rest of the British Isles at the expense of the Celtic languages, through the imperatives of political and economic power. It was further encouraged by deliberate policy of a confident and aggressive government. It then strengthened its position as a World language through its wide diffusion outside the British Isles by trade, colonization, and conquest. The process expanded with the English settlements in Northern America in the seventeenth century, and also in the West Indies in competition with Spanish, French and Dutch colonizers. British domination of the Indian sub-continent dates from the second half of the eighteenth century, adding a further magnitude to the expansion of English. British settlement in Australia, the British domination in South Africa, Singapore, British Guiana, New Zealand, Hong Kong, West, East and Southern Africa pushed the geographical and population frontiers of the use of English by vast magnitudes. In the Philippines and Puerto Rico, the American form of English appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, further magnifying the use of English. To this historical backdrop should be added the population growth in the United States of America as a further contribution to the increase in the use of English.

The aforementioned historical base of vast populations using English, in proportion more than any other second language, was the reality in the World even during the first decades of the twentieth century. By the 1980s, there were an estimated 400 million native speakers of English, and about the same number using it as a second language. Some 76 percent of all secondary school students were having English as a second language.

It is not surprising that new phenomena of the twentieth century took as its communication foundation this vast base, and built upon it to push even further the use of English.

UNESCO's Statistical Year Book of 1994 reports that the number of book titles published in English in countries where English is neither the mother tongue nor the first language, came to over 10,000. By comparison, book titles in French came to only 1,800. Internationally circulated scientific and technological publications would show an even greater proportion in English.

The economic and political power of the United States, the need for a major lingua franca for the scientific community, for International trade, for banking and finance, for the electronic communications era, were but a few of the new twentieth century phenomena that have built on the historical foundation of English usage. These factors energized the raising of English to its present dominant position. English has now become a near-global tongue, used by some 700 million speakers, bulk of the World's mail and 80 percent of electronic information.

In addition, current pressures for globalization of the market place, of communication, of the scientific and technological spheres, have placed English permanently in its current eminent position as the lingua franca of International business and politics. These same factors make it imperative that the learning of English be given high priority, and that this high priority is placed unambiguously in the context of functionality in the multiple uses of English in the multiple facets of mega-trends for globalization.

To emphasize that even good translation modes will become dangerously inadequate over the next decade, may I quote an extract from the Bangkok Post Outlook Section of 8 September 1995, titled "Greater Highways in the Sky". It goes as follow:

> "….To make sure nothing goes wrong, traffic controllers and pilots keep in constant contact with each other throughout the flight. Since pilots come from all parts of the World, air-to-ground communications have to be in one standard language: English…ICAO is developing a new system, which will make use of satellites and digital technology for aviation control. The system, which is expected to be ready by the year 2000, will enable controllers and pilots as well as airport officers – wherever they are in the World – to communicate, swiftly and correctly, via computer language…"

This piece of information on technology research and advancement certainly underlines further that beyond the year 2000, the English language will be essential for World communication.

The data presented earlier is important for our deliberations, not merely because of the confirmation of the importance of English as a World language. The data also stresses that many types of uses for the English language must necessarily be a characteristic of the "shape of things to come". The types of uses arise from the diverse functionalities of English that are likely to be demanded beyond the year 2000.

Surely the critical operative word functionality must have fundamental and far-reaching implications for the development of curricula, methodologies, evaluation and other processes in English learning and teaching. Indeed, in many countries, the antiquated "Latin Model" of infusing huge doses of grammar, has been replaced already with proficiency-based curricula for communicating in English.

I wish to raise the issue of overall design for your deliberations. In the context of the vastly increased types of functionalities indicated earlier, perhaps a new and radical view of functionality itself needs to be developed, and with it, new implications for curriculum development and other components of English learning and teaching. One possible approach may be to shift the emphasis of the design from the limited "supply" side to the

"demand" side. Given the varied and changing specific demands made on the use of English nowadays, the stress on the "supply" aspect is clearly not valid.

Even to-day, the demands may range from mere knowledge of the Roman script, say, for punching computer keys, to being able to understand and use technical brochures for operating household items, or comprehending food labels, etc., to following installation or repair manuals by technicians. Then there are Commercial English, Scientific English, and even its use in literature and culture. The English proficiencies required for each of these are naturally different. Should the educational provisions, which are aimed at achieving those varied proficiencies, necessarily be derived from the characteristics of each of the requirements? Should the proficiencies be defined case by case?

Rather than presuming what should be the foundational proficiencies that can serve all these highly varied sets of individual proficiencies, it may be necessary to define carefully and systematically <u>first</u> these varied and different sets of proficiencies, and only then derive any common foundational proficiencies. These then could be the common cores of proficiencies for beginners of English language learning.

Later on the design may eventually include a smorgasbord of learning sequences for learners to select from, according to individual functional requirements. Some are likely to be modular and additive; some of short, and others of long duration.

I venture to indicate here examples of some initial questions that may arise from such a concept of demand-side functionality.

- What are the <u>situations</u> in which English is to be used?
- What are the language <u>activities or environments</u> in which the learners will need to be engaged?
- What are the language <u>functions</u>, which the learner will need to fulfil?
- What are the <u>notions or concepts</u>, which the learner needs to be able to handle?
- What will the learner need to be <u>able to do</u> with respect to each topic?

Of course such a design content must be more complicated than ones in general use. This may well be as serious constraint to effective implementations, if <u>current</u> modes of learning and teaching are used.

In addition, in many countries, other constraints may exist. Among them are inadequate teacher proficiencies, and lack of, or inappropriate, or even negative environmental reinforcement for the learning of English.

The former has arisen not only from possibly ineffective teacher training curricula and methodologies, but also from the very large number of teachers who have to be trained in a relatively short period to meet the quantitative requirements of English learning and teaching. The latter is an almost

inevitable consequence of the social and cultural milieu, which is devoid of suitable resources to support the reinforcement and application of the initial learnings in English. Both aspects are likely to take a considerable time to reach levels of adequacy.

However, the future of English language education is not too bleak. With the advancement of information technology, one may look forward to the time, I believe, when technology may be fully used to make up for the aforementioned and other inadequacies. We already have language laboratories. Computers have been used widely to assist in the learning and teaching process. It may not be too Utopian to predict that one of these days, perhaps in a decade or so, something along the line of a <u>Flight Simulator</u> may be available to learners of languages.

In the field of aviation, integral to pilot training, flight simulators are now essential training instruments for all airlines, air forces and space programmes. A trainee is totally immersed in simulated real-life situations – involving the techniques as well as the atmosphere, the environment, which have psychological effects on the learning and behavioural processes.

Can we then think ahead, in the "shape of things to come", to the development of corresponding <u>English Language Simulators,</u> which are computer-assisted, complete with audios and visuals, and interactive, and so on? Currently shared-time and on-line computer-assisted simulation or instruction is not merely possible but economically feasible for language instruction. It can provide language scenarios for a vast number of situations. It can accommodate a large variety of learning styles and other learning attributes. It would be relatively easy to alter curriculum learning-teaching sequences, as and when needed, in contrast to the inertia of traditional "classroom" situations.

Fortunately a substantial range of software and hardware are already available in the market, and more will surely appear. Some adaptations most certainly will be required.

We may have to focus first on teacher trainees, as facilitators of learning through the new medium. This may be followed by the introduction to schools with language laboratories that could be converted into computer assisted language-learning simulators. Then these may become resource centres for a cluster of schools. Finally all schools may have such facilities. We may move on to even community learning centres to meet non-formal learning demands not only for English but for any other foreign language as well, as needed by the general population.

Indigenous software and hardware development work must be encouraged, and it must take into account local cultural and language-specific barriers and demand requirements, vis-à-vis English learning and teaching, or of any other language.

You would, no doubt, recognize that all three important issues, that is, (I) multiple proficiency; (II) inadequate teacher proficiencies; and (III) non-

supportive social and cultural milieu, may find solutions in the suggestion of the user-friendly, computer-assisted, language learning simulators. This aspect alone, I believe, would make this suggestion worthy of serious consideration.

Since the aforementioned would involve the creation of innovative and sustainable designs for English language curricula, and learning sequences, may I seek your tolerance regarding a few observations I would like to make in this respect. These observations have been derived from being a concerned consumer, and not, as I said at the beginning, from academic expertise.

We have seen linguists and linguistic experts designing classroom language teaching and learning materials along lines conforming to their individual notions of linguistic structure and theory. Sometimes one had the feeling that there is greater interest in promoting those notions than in researching careful language learning effectiveness in pupils. We have seen over-emphases on language as recurring structural units, with syntax largely ignored. Such designs do not take into account the vital environment or scenario for the language use, which the simulation situations require.

The development of learning sequences may best be done, I believe, by active practitioners in the applied field of teaching English, and not by theoreticians alone who may tend to adhere to one aspect of language learning with which each theoretician has best equipped herself or himself. Language communication is a behavioural phenomenon in a real World setting, and not necessarily dependent solely on analyses of language structures. The excessive devotion to grammatically correct linguistic competence demands high skills abstraction totally beyond functional operational skills of learners, in addition to being irrelevant to the kinds of language demands I outlined earlier.

The point about a simulation intervention is that language speakers and writers do not simply generate sentences in the abstract, but in context. Language is for receiving and transmitting information <u>in context</u>, across the wide scope spectrum, as fitting each particular position in the spectrum. All else, including the nicety, grammaticality and elegance of speech, can become subsidiary to this pragmatic use, and mere tools for the purpose, not ends in themselves.

None of us can guess what the English language will be like in a hundred years' time. What appears quite certain, however, is that information technology and knowledge growth is moving ahead at a phenomenal speed. It seems unlikely that any other language will supercede the English language as a World medium of communication, given its present head-start. If a nation is to keep up-to-date with developments in all spheres of knowledge, particularly in scientific and technological research, it has to be able to have an instant access to the World "knowledge bank:, through electronic and other means. This requires proficiencies in English, which is the dominant World language for International communication. The English language will continue to be the major vehicle that drives us along the information superhighway. The development of a nation, therefore, will make it imperative for the people to learn and master the English language. Hence the education system-must

seeks ways to improve both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this learning area.

We have also to recognize that societies are organizing rapidly, having as focal points <u>people</u> who can innovate, who can increase productivity, who can maintain sustainable development, through <u>knowledge</u>. The co-ordinating and activating new economic nucleus is knowledge, the resource with the highest value, the resource that has the highest "value adding" potential. The traditional triad of capital, labour and materials as raw components of progress is being replaced by knowledge in the new information era – knowledge held and used by people, knowledge that people in countries must have access to, acquire and expand, so that the countries themselves may progress. Not preparing for this may even be called suicidal for our countries. The quickest access may well be largely through the English language.

Let us pool our efforts and ideas together to make it easy, enjoyable and profitable for our people to learn and to want to learn English and acquire sufficient proficiencies to make it truly a tool for communication in a World without frontiers, and a tool for the uninterrupted development of our countries beyond the year 2000.

Let us also remember that predicting the "shape of things to come" is exciting. But <u>shaping the shape</u> of things to come is even more gratifying.