

Book Review

Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching: The Case of Thailand

Pornapit Darasawang and Hayo Reinders (Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

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This new book is a collection of eleven essays on a range of new methods of teaching English in a variety of contexts with specific reference to Thailand. The collection forms part of Palgrave Macmillan's *New Language Learning and Teaching Environments* series. The volume takes snapshots of individual research initiatives across a variety of disciplines and methodologies, including online collaborative learning; the development of a specialist MA course for EST teachers; the establishment of self-access centres; task-based, blended, and play-based learning; and teacher attitudes and beliefs.

The snapshots offered here are clearly those of work in progress as innovation meets stasis in the field of English-language teaching in Thailand. Chapter 2, on educational innovations at the national level, offers a sobering diagnosis of the dysfunction in implementation that effectively stifles change in English-teaching in the school system, despite promising policy developments at national government level. Haphazard organisation, top-down attitudes, faddish thinking, and simply too many poorly-implemented projects radiating simultaneously from centre to periphery serve to confuse and alienate teachers. The teachers then predictably under-commit to such changes on the expectation that they will simply be dropped by the next Education Minister.

All the chapters are well written and researched in their own terms, but the projects outlined in several of them seem not to have seeded much innovation or growth beyond their own enactment. Chapter 4, on the encouragement of creative thinking among graduate students, though interesting, offers little suggestion as to how creative and experimental thinking could be established as a wider norm among teachers in Thailand. Chapter 5, on online writing collaboration across schools and even countries, seems to offer interesting possibilities but only if such programmes are formidably well communicated and energetically organized, which is asking a lot of overworked teachers. Although chapter 8 on blended learning is, again, well presented, it seems to point down a cul-de-sac.

Taken as a whole, the collection alludes to a variety of factors holding back both innovation in English teaching and Thai learners from making more substantial progress in the language. Several chapters describe the failure of the particular project or innovation covered in the chapter (creative learning in chapter 4; online collaborative journalism in chapter 5; the blended learning project in chapter 8), or of unfulfilled promise and lapse following success (the account of Self Access Centres in chapter 6).

Naturally, failure, however conceived, is a common outcome for many innovative teaching research projects, as the authors of chapter 11 note, and where it appears in this book the reasons for it are pondered and discussed, which is valuable. Some of these threads are drawn together in the concluding chapter, but more of the reasons behind failures in innovation nonetheless also emerge clearly enough once the essays are read in aggregate.

Beyond the context of policy, administration and implementation, this reviewer felt the need for more specific coverage on how new generations of primary and secondary school teachers are currently trained; what might need to change; and the extent to which such training could embed innovation in the system. This is lightly touched upon in chapters 7 and 10, but is not discussed further. How do Thai teachers and teacher training institutions conceive of innovation within the local context? To what extent do they feel it is necessary and advocate it, and in what forms? If they do not, why not? The authors of the useful summary chapter 11 are at pains to emphasise “the importance of involving those who *implement* an innovation in the *development* of that innovation” (p.166, italics in the original). If this includes teacher trainers, which it must do, more on this would have been welcome.

The above paragraphs might suggest that this is a depressing collection, but actually it is not. There are also successes: in particular the play-based learning at primary level (chapter 10) and the KMUTT EST MA (chapter 3), while the OBL project at Chulalongkorn University (chapter 9) also seems to hold promise for at least some learners. Indeed, this book offers rich and varied accounts of experimental research and commitment in a variety of contexts, each element of which can plant seeds for future good practice. The outcomes the book describes offer much food for thought for teachers, trainers, course designers and administrators who have to work with administrative uncertainty and entrenched attitudes. Although contextualised in Thailand, this book will also appeal to readers in many other countries who face similar issues.

About the reviewer

Julian Chase is an assistant lecturer in the Centre for Applied English Studies at the University of Hong Kong where he teaches English for Academic Purposes.