



READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS OF CLASS XII STUDENTS IN GOVERNMENT AND BUDDHIST SCHOOLS – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

English has gained the status of a global language in today's globalized world. It determines the standard of people's lives, the status they command in society, as well as the jobs they can or cannot get. The knowledge of English, in a way, is increasingly determining the fates of our future generations. The language ability levels, including reading comprehension skills, of students in class XII especially determine their future prospects, since this is the age when they seek to enter institutions of higher education, and their knowledge of English ends up determining not just which institution they get into, but resultantly, sometimes what they end up doing with their lives.. This paper compares the reading comprehension levels of students from Buddhist schools with those from general schools in Chiang Mai province in Northern Thailand, based on a 30 minute test consisting of 24 questions. The test was divided into two sections, with the first section comprising two passages for reading followed by questions testing comprehension, and the second part comprising questions that tested vocabulary based on these passages, like synonyms, antonym, prepositional phrases and adjectives. This study has serious implications in the students' placement in institutions of higher education in Thailand as well as abroad, and also has implications in their employability prospects.

Introduction

There are several cases for the importance of English as a global language, as can be seen from the figures mentioned below. When it comes to engineering and other technical subjects, a majority of the literature available, and the terms and terminology used are in English. The United Nations, the widely acknowledged neutral, global body of international peace and welfare, with 189 members under its wing, uses English as the official language for communication, thus making it an essential language for diplomatic purposes. Not just this, but the internet is one of the pivotal sources of information exchange in today's world,



and as much as 36 % of this exchange happens in English. It is not so much the number of speakers who speak it, but the areas in which it is used, and the key it holds in several strategically indispensable areas, which make it the most powerful and influential language in the modern world.

However, Thailand was late to arrive at the scene of English speaking populations in the world. Traditionally, people in Thailand have always spoken a variety of local dialects, and have been unified by Thai, which has been the lingua franca of Thailand. Of late, however, the government has been making several efforts to upgrade the proficiency of its citizens when it comes to English, since it is becoming increasingly clear that this is the only way through which Thailand can get itself to be accepted as having a global presence and competitiveness by the rest of the world. A new national language policy was drafted by the Royal Institute of Thailand, which was forwarded by Abhisit Vejjajiva, the then Prime Minister of Thailand, and this was later approved by Yingluck Shinawatra., the incumbent Prime Minister. This policy focused on improving the standard of English education at the primary level. This has been just one of the several measures adopted by the government to improve the status of English in the country. However, the results are not as good as they were expected to be, because of a variety of reasons, the lack of qualified teachers across the country being one of them.

The Thai Education System

The education system in Thailand consists of twelve years. This has been a priority area for its government since 1932. The 12 years are divided into four equal parts – the pre-primary, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary. Students generally start their education at the age of 3 and end their upper secondary education by the time they are 17. Education up to the lower secondary level is compulsory in Thailand. The government has taken several steps to improve the standard of education in Thailand, such as the National Education Act (1999), the National Education Plan (2002-2016), an introduction to human-centred, economic development based, balanced education, and several other attempts to increase equity and access to education. The classroom to student ratio ranges from 1:19 to 1:37 across levels, on average. The focus of the Thai government has been to “Education builds the nations, empowers the individuals, generates employment”. They enable citizens to view education as an asset to generate income, by developing a knowledge-based society that would lead to a knowledge-based economy. The reforms the government introduced in the education system included learning reforms, teacher reforms, education quality assurance and a recognized administration system that aimed to promote a learner centred model, an emphasis on active learning, utilization of local wisdom and a holistic approach. Several initiatives have been taken to improve the standard of teachers. Besides this, the first 12 years of education were made free, and several administrative and ministry changes were implemented. The evaluation was done at three levels – the classroom, the educational constitution and the



national level. Thus, there are several steps that have been taken, especially in the last ten years, and there is a high demand for English language learning in the country.

Our focus in this paper will mainly be on students of the the higher education level, which is the last level of formal education that happens after the upper secondary school education is done. This level comprises colleges, universities and other such certifying institutions. These institutions are divided into two levels based on the type of degree they provide – those that provide associate degrees and those that provide degrees. The OEC (2004) states that “basic education can be provided by either general schools, private schools, or under the jurisdiction of either Buddhist or other religious institutions”. The present study targets students from this level of education. The participants in this research are students from classe XII, and they have been divided into two groups. One group of students is from general schools, while the other group is from Buddhist schools.

Buddhist schools in Thailand don't share the structure discussed above, neither do they share a common history. Buddhist schools in Thailand began with *bhikku* (monks) conducting the education in ancient times. Buddhism has always played a very important role in Thai history and has been the locus of religious as well as secular education, with its temples, monasteries and palaces each playing its part, as did the family, the basic unit of initial education for Thai children. Boys were initially the only children who took part in this education, as it was compulsory for them to join a monastery at the age of six, whereupon they studied Buddhist morals, reading skills, writing skills and arithmetic. Rama V was the first to make the education system compulsory for every child to go through. This is when the temple had to relinquish its rights to educate students, and the children were instead handed over to the state. However, this only lasted a few decades, since the state was unable to manage the system adequately, with populations rising, and the management of education and the administration not being able to withstand this increased pressure. Hence, the temple once again became an alternative source of education for students. While children from the richer families went to private schools, children from families that lacked the requisite resources went to temple schools, which were actually run by the government with a great deal of support from the *Sangha*.

Thus, there was a clear class divide that existed between students that went to these two kinds of school, and clearly there was also a difference in quality that crept in, owing to the lack of resources that was synonymous with these schools run by the *Sangha*. How much this difference was or is, is something that remained to be studied, While there may be differences in other subjects as well, the scope of this study limits us to comparing the differences that exist in the reading abilities of students from two general schools and two Buddhist schools in class XII. The objective of this study was to compare the reading abilities of students from general schools with those from Buddhist schools. These students were all in class XII, when they were in the formative years of a young academic career. Their reading abilities at this

stage pay an important role in the kinds of job they land or the kinds of competitive exams they are able to clear, thus having a tremendous impact upon their careers. All the participants in this research are from the Chiang Mai province in northern Thailand, where the population speak Kham Muang, which is alternately known as Northern Thai or Lanna. However, the medium of education in this region is Central Thai, and this dialect is understood by everyone. It is only the educated class that uses English in this region, besides it being used for certain business purposes. The temple schools here are run by the government, and the curricula they follow is also the same as those followed in general schools in this region. I was an English teacher in Chiang Mai Rajabhat University for two years, where I taught students from both general schools as well as Buddhist schools. Based on experience, I had a clear idea that students from general schools did better at reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Methodology

The method of collecting the data for this paper was in the form of a test that was handed out to students from four different schools in the Chiang Mai province in Thailand. These students were in class XII, the specific reasons for which have been discussed earlier. These tests were taken by students from general as well as Buddhist schools (2 each), following which the scores were tabulated and their totals calculated. Each test had two parts. The first part had two passages for comprehension. Each passage was followed by two questions, and the answer to each of these questions was evaluated based on three parameters, which are as follows:

1. Main Point
2. Accuracy
3. Grammar

The weightage assigned to each of these was 3, 1 & 1 respectively. Thus, a student who was able to identify the main point obtained 3 points, while accuracy got them 1 additional point, and error-free grammar got them another point. The second part tested the following abilities:

1. Synonyms
2. Antonyms
3. Prepositional Phrases
4. Adjectives

The total time given to the students to complete this test was 30 minutes. It was important to ensure that the students attempted these tests seriously, in order for the results to be credible and reliable. Teachers were given clear instructions on how to conduct the test, and the

students were given a reminder in the form of some instructions provided at the beginning of the test. The following instructions were included:

- You are kindly requested to complete this questionnaire with real honesty.
- This questionnaire is meant only for research purposes. Therefore, it is important to take it seriously. Your answers will be kept confidential.
- The test is divided into two parts. Each part has various sub-sections. All questions are compulsory.
- Don't hesitate to seek clarification whenever needed.

It was made clear to the participants that the test was to be taken seriously, which a majority of them did with the help of these clear instructions, the expectation setting, as well as with the help of the invigilating teachers. Separate instructions had been given to the teachers as well. The implications of this research in the field of education, and the impact it could make to the forthcoming generations was made clear to the participants, which motivated them to take the test with sincerity.

Analysis

Based on the test that was administered to 30 students each from two Buddhist schools and two general schools, it was observed that the general schools produced results of 19.57 and 21.6 respectively, while the Buddhist schools produced results of 11.77 and 8.5 respectively. It can thus be seen that there is a huge chasm between the performances of students from general schools, as compared to those from Buddhist schools.

	School 1	School 2
General	21.6	19.57
Buddhist	11.77	8.5

Table 1.1: A brief tabulation of the final scores obtained by participants from each of the four schools

A detailed analysis of the tabulated scores can be seen in table 1.2 below. Here, we can see that the trend of participants from Buddhist schools scoring lower than their counterparts from general schools is nearly uniform throughout the test, across sections. We see that the section on prepositional phrases has in general been poorly attempted by all the participants, but besides this, participants from general schools have scored above 2.0 in all the sections, and above 2.5 in most sections. In contrast, participants from Buddhist schools have scored above 2.5 in only one section, and above 2.0 in 4 sections. Thus, there is a stark contrast in their performances. Also, while comparing the performance of the students within each

group, the first part has had better scores than the second part in general. Thus, we can see that while students from Buddhist schools are lagging behind in nearly every section of reading comprehension, when compare to students from general schools, they particularly need attention when it comes to the second part of the test, which consists of questions around synonyms, antonyms, prepositional phrases and adjectives.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
General 1	3.03	2.80	2.53	2.70	2.73	3.57	1.27	2.97
General 2	2.87	2.80	2.63	2.73	2.07	2.87	1.03	2.57
Buddhist 1	2.80	2.43	2.07	1.67	1.43	0.47	0.30	0.60
Buddhist 2	2.00	1.73	1.83	1.07	0.43	0.40	0.47	0.57

Table 1.2: A brief tabulation of the scores obtained by participants from each of the four schools, in each of the questions in the reading comprehension test.

Limitations and Future Projections

As with every study, this study also comes with its own set of limitations. Firstly, it consists of participants only from Chiang Mai province, and that too only a small sample of students from this region. It is only when this study is replicated in several other schools and in larger areas, that we can ascertain the existence of these gaps in the education system. Students from a wider variety in terms of the level of education they are at can be included as well. The study can also be replicated in countries other than Thailand where similar dichotomies in the education system exist, for example in other countries in South East Asia. This paper is also a part of a larger study aimed at collecting more data from a few more schools, and including the data for students from class XII as well. In addition to this, other skills such as language ability and the use of reading strategies by students can also be tested with similar methods. Once we have a fair amount of data available, several statistical analyses can also be conducted in order to figure out statistically significant patterns that might emerge from these studies.

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