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Research Article:

Using English as a Language of Instruction in Rural Schools in Thailand: Key Challenges for Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Primary school teachers in Thailand are encouraged to use English as a language of instruction across all curriculum areas in their classrooms, not just in English lessons. However, many non-English major teachers who teach in rural schools struggle to deliver lessons in English due to the lack of professional knowledge and ongoing support for English language usage. This paper considers the experiences of non-English major teachers working in rural schools in Thailand who participated in a coaching and mentoring program to support their motivation and confidence to use English as a language of instruction. A participatory case study research design was used for this study, which included classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teacher–participants before, during and after the coaching and mentoring program. Some of the key challenges that arose included the use of Thai as a language of instruction, lack of resources and support for the use of English as a language of instruction, lack of clarity in school policies and the limited availability of professional learning for teachers in rural schools. There is an urgent need for additional professional learning support for teachers, especially those working in rural schools, to ensure success of the Thai government's policy aim to make English available as a language of instruction in all primary schools.

Keywords: English as a language of instruction, classroom practice, non-English major teachers, Thai rural schools, coaching, mentoring

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a rapid growth of the use of English as a language of instruction in schools and universities around the world since the turn of the century, as education systems seek to internationalise and compete within globalised education and business markets. As a result, there has been an increased policy emphasis by governments on "the use of English language to teach academic subjects other than English itself in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority population is not English" (Macaro, 2018, p. 19). The dominance of English as a global lingua franca in education, business, government and cultural engagement (Rao, 2019) has made it impossible to ignore as an educational policy imperative, although this has resulted in significant challenges for policymakers, education systems and educators across much of the world.

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education (2008; 2014) has increasingly encouraged the use of English as a second language of instruction across the general curriculum in primary and secondary schools. The aim is to ensure that students can use English to communicate in multiple contexts, access further tertiary studies, and compete in a globalised employment market (Trakulkasemsuk, 2018). Additionally, the Ministry of Education has sought to increase the emphasis on English as a language of instruction to help improve Thailand's performance on international metrics of English language proficiency, which have become proxy measures of the quality and success of national education systems. For example, the Ministry of Education aimed to introduce bilingual (i.e., Thai and English) curriculum at approximately 2,000 district schools during 2020 by offering three distinct English programs: International Program, using international curriculum delivered by foreign teachers; Intensive English Program, with five intensive English classes each week; and General English Program, focusing on four core skills from a young age (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021; Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2019).

While the Basic Education Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008) does not prescribe English as a language of instruction across the general curriculum, there have been ongoing efforts to encourage the usage of English as a language of instruction in Thai primary and secondary schools as part of broader attempts to raise the status of English from being a foreign language to an additional national language due to its widespread usage across professional, political and social contexts (Foley, 2005). However, key impediments to success have included persistently low English proficiency of Thai teachers and issues in the recruitment and retention of fluent English-speaking teachers (Mattavarat et al., 2017; Noom-ura, 2013). Despite the encouragement of non-English major teachers to use English in addition to Thai as a language of instruction across the curriculum, many primary and secondary teachers have continued to use Thai as the only language of instruction (Franz & Teo, 2017). The issue is especially pronounced in rural schools, where many teachers lack the training and confidence to use English as a second language of instruction (Hayes, 2010).

In 2014, the Thai government introduced the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Ministry of Education, 2014), alongside communicative language teaching as the official approach to teaching and learning English in Thai schools and universities, in an attempt to lift English proficiency levels for students and teachers (Kaur et al., 2016). Despite the continued emphasis on English language learning, limited gains have been made (Howlett & Waemusa, 2019). According to the latest English Proficiency Index (Education First, 2021), Thailand was ranked 100 out of 112 countries, with a "Very Low Proficiency" rating, placing it 22nd out of 24 participating Asian countries. While students at urban schools in Bangkok and wealthy international schools perform comparatively well on such metrics, there is evidence of widening educational inequality (Lathapipat, 2018), in which students in rural and high-poverty communities continue to face substantial educational disadvantage (World Bank, 2020). There are significant challenges faced by schools serving rural communities, including the hiring and retention of qualified teaching staff, as well as limited infrastructure, resources and funding provided by the government to smaller rural schools (Goel et al., 2016). With approximately half of the Thai population living in rural communities (Keyes, 2019), the widening educational gap between urban and rural schools (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019) needs to be urgently addressed.

This paper reports findings from a project that worked collaboratively with non-English major teachers who teach in rural Thai primary schools on supporting their confidence and motivation to use English as a language of instruction across the curriculum. A coaching and mentoring program was established across 10 rural primary schools in the Subsomboon Pochai School Network, Khon Kaen Primary Educational Service Area Office 2 (KK PESAO 2), located in Northeast Thailand. In this paper, we focus on the specific challenges for teaching and learning through the use of English as a language of instruction in rural schools faced by the non-English major teachers interviewed for this project. In doing so, we hope to illuminate the urgent policy need for additional professional learning support for teachers working in rural Thai schools, as part of a broader commitment to addressing educational inequality and increasing English proficiency for students in rural and high-poverty communities.

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Investigate the challenges faced by non-English major teachers using English as a language of instruction across the curriculum in rural schools in Thailand.
2. Examine the effects of coaching and mentoring as professional learning supports for teachers in rural schools in Thailand.
3. Consider policy implications arising from coaching and mentoring to support non-English major teachers working in rural schools in Thailand.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The project utilised a participatory case study research design (Ridder, 2019; Williams

& Keady, 2021), including classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teacher–participants before, during and after the coaching and mentoring program. One teacher–participant was recruited from each of the 10 participating primary schools in the Subsomboon Pochai School Network KK PESAO 2, located in rural Northeast Thailand, approximately 400 km from Bangkok. Table 1 provides an overview of the 10 teacher–participants, including their teaching experience and English proficiency levels. Participating schools and teachers were initially contacted via email by the first author, with follow-up visits to the schools undertaken prior to the commencement of data collection. All teacher–participants were non-English major teachers, which meant that they were not specifically trained as English teachers, instead teaching subjects such as mathematics, science, Thai and social sciences. Written informed consent from teacher–participants was obtained prior to data collection in accordance with the University of Southern Queensland's human ethics approval (ref#H19REA022). All participant documents were provided in English and Thai, and participants were asked to provide pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The levels of participants' English proficiency provided in Table 1 are taken from their performance on the common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR) online test, which was required by the Office of the Basic Education Commission to assess the English proficiency of teachers in Thailand.

Table 1. Teacher–participants

Name	Sex	Degree	Subjects taught	Year levels taught	English proficiency compared to CEFR level	Teaching experience
Sailom	F	B. A. Computer Science	Mathematics English Occupation and Technology	Prathomsuksa 1–3 (ages 7–9)	A2 Elementary • Very basic personal, family and job-related language • Enough to meet the needs with slow, clear speech • Short, simple texts on familiar matter	5 years
Meaw	F	B. E. Mathematics	Mathematics Thai Social Studies, Religion and Culture	Prathomsuksa 5–6 (ages 11–12)	A2 Elementary	37 years
Theptida	F	B. E. Mathematics	Mathematics	Prathomsuksa 1–6 (ages 7–12)	A2 Elementary	3 years

(Continued on next page)

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Name	Sex	Degree	Subjects taught	Year levels taught	English proficiency compared to CEFR level	Teaching experience
Chartchai	M	B. E. Computer Education	Occupation and Technology	Prathomsuksa 1–6 (ages 7–12)	B1 Intermediate • Main points on common topics at work, school, or travelling • General and specific details given clear speech • Factual texts on subjects of interest	8 years
Wipa	F	B. E. Mathematics	Thai Mathematics Social Studies, Religion and Culture	Prathomsuksa 1–6 (ages 7–12)	A1 Beginner • Very basic, everyday phrases • Carefully articulated, slow speech with long pauses • Very short, simple texts, familiar names and words	37 years
Namthip	F	B. E. Science	Science Mathematics	Prathomsuksa 1–6 (ages 7–12)	A2 Elementary	11 years
Dokkoon	F	B. E. Mathematics	Thai Mathematics Science	Prathomsuksa 1–6 (ages 7–12)	A2 Elementary	24 years
Kroothai	F	B. E. Mathematics	Thai Mathematics Science Health and Physical Education	Prathomsuksa 6 (age 12)	A1 Beginner	19 years
Beota	F	B. E. Science (Physics)	Science Mathematics	Prathomsuksa 5–6 (ages 11–12)	A1 Beginner	10 years
Tatsaya	F	B. E. Mathematics	Thai Mathematics Science Arts	Prathomsuksa 3–6 (ages 9–12)	A2 Elementary	17 years

Notes: B. A. = Bachelor of Art; B. E. = Bachelor of Education; F = female; M = male

Data were collected during a six-month period in 2019, noting that the data collection period preceded the COVID-19 pandemic. Data included qualitative semi-structured interviews undertaken with teacher–participants at the beginning, middle and end of the project, alongside classroom observations by the first author, researcher reflections, coaching and mentoring planning documentation, and curriculum materials used by teacher–participants. Five sets of one-hour classroom observations were undertaken with each teacher–participant by the first author, which were combined with researcher reflections to inform follow-up interviews, during which teacher–participants reflected on the challenges and successes they faced in using English as a language of instruction. Data relating to each teacher–participant were combined for analysis, so that a rich qualitative range of information regarding the use of English in the classroom could be considered alongside teacher behaviours and attitudes, and so that the effects of coaching and mentoring as professional development strategies could be tracked. For ease of engagement with teacher–participants, interviews were conducted in Thai and later translated into English by the first author. In this paper, we attend closely to the findings from the classroom observations and interviews with teacher–participants following each of the five classroom observations.

All interview and observational data were thematically analysed, following a process of data familiarisation and initial coding, with subsequent theme generation, revision and definition (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Following data collection, transcripts and observation notes were shared across the research team to ensure that the generated codes and themes were agreed upon and clearly linked to the research objectives. To ensure reliability of coding, NVivo 11 was employed to generate and manage data coding and themes. The key themes that emerged from the data were:

1. The use of Thai as a language of instruction.
2. Lack of resources and support for the use of English as a language of instruction.
3. Lack of clarity in school policies.
4. Limited availability of professional learning for teachers in rural schools.

These themes are expanded in the following section, which explores the key challenges faced by teacher–participants in using English as a language of instruction in rural Thai primary schools.

RESULTS

The Use of Thai as a Language of Instruction

One of the most evident barriers to using English as a language of instruction for the teacher–participants was the persistent preference of using Thai in the classroom context during each of the observed lessons. For example, teacher–participants consistently greeted their students in Thai, followed by persistent usage of Thai in describing and explaining curriculum content, providing directions, asking and answering questions, as well as farewelling students at the conclusion of lessons. This is borne out in the research literature,

which suggests that such reliance on first languages in classrooms is based on ingrained habits, behaviours and attitudes (e.g., Cahapay, 2020; Molway et al., 2022; Tekin & Garton, 2020). For example, Tatsaya explained:

> I never use English to instruct students in my mathematics class. I only greet students, such as "Good morning", "Hello", "How are you?" I rarely use English because nobody uses English. I think the idea of using English as a language of instruction is good, but we may have to improve teachers' English proficiency first.
>
> (Tatsaya, interview)

Only using English infrequently to greet students, then reverting to Thai for the lesson, will have very limited effect on improving students' English language proficiency (Sibomana, 2022). When asked why she persistently used only Thai in the classroom, Wipa (see Table 1) explained that "I am used to instructing my students in Thai because it saves me time to present the learning content. Moreover, my students are not scared to interact with me while they are learning". Similarly, Beota preferred to use Thai as a language of instruction because translanguaging was difficult to adopt in the classroom (Oliver et al., 2021):

> First, it is easy to use Thai to describe complex content in science to my students. Second, I have been familiar with using Thai for a long time in my teaching, so I do not know why I need English. Last, using Thai saves my time, in that I do not attempt to use English and then suddenly come to translate English into Thai again.
>
> (Beota, interview)

Kroothai also expressed reluctance to use English in the classroom, explaining that "I feel it is hard to use English to instruct my students if we are accustomed to using our mother tongue. In addition, having not used English for a long time, it is very difficult to use it in classroom teaching". The aversion to code-switching between Thai and English was a common experience for teacher–participants, who found that it was easier to consistently use Thai in the classroom (Surjowati & Siswahjudioko, 2020). For example, Kroothai explained:

> I am not enthusiastic to communicate in English because most of my teaching content is numbers. I do not know how to use English when I want to explain the solutions to problem questions. I think teaching in Thai is still good. If there is someone who can show me how to use English in my class, that would be helpful.
>
> (Kroothai, interview)

While there is an important place for first language use in the classroom (Beisenbayeva, 2020), the reliance on Thai combined with the reluctance to use English provided a clear obstacle to the success of using English as a language of instruction. As Wipa explained,

"I think the notion of using English as a language of instruction is possible in rural schools, but I am not sure it will be achieved in practice because most teachers do not use English". Dokkoon realised the importance of including English in classroom learning, but found it challenging:

> I used to sing English songs for students, but I never use English in conversation with my students. They are just Primary 1 students and they do not understand a complete sentence. I used to say just words (e.g., "I", "you", "very good"). I agree that we should use English to instruct students in teaching practice because students will take an opportunity to learn an international language. They may have to use it in the future. We need to support English for them when they were young.
>
> (Dokkoon, interview)

The issues of time, familiarity and ease are closely related to issues of ability, anxiety and discomfort in language teaching (Faez et al., 2021; Shadiev & Huang, 2020; Shin et al., 2020), in which the avoidance of English in the classroom by teachers becomes problematic for student outcomes, which are linked to success on assessments of English proficiency. In particular, teachers do not model successful English language practices for their students, which discourages the use of English for communication in classroom learning (Sert, 2019). The research literature suggests that a bilingual approach, with regular code-switching, would be most beneficial for students and teachers (e.g., Awad et al., 2020; Lindqvist, 2009; Sun-Alperin & Wang, 2011). However, for the teacher–participants in this study, code-switching between Thai and English presented substantial challenges, so they continued to solely use Thai as a language of instruction.

Lack of Resources and Support for the Use of English as a Language of Instruction

A second key theme that emerged from the analysis of classroom observations, researcher reflections and teacher–participant interviews was the lack of support and resources to use English in the classroom. The teacher–participants felt free to only use Thai in the classroom because there was no incentive provided to use English, nor was there any deterrent to the use of Thai. For example, Meaw explained:

> I do not have the dedication to use English in my class because there is no difference to me whether I use or do not use English. There are no rewards nor punishments for me to do so. I think the situation has been like this for so long, so English is not promoted in this country. If administrators focused seriously on using English in schools for all people, English could be more used. Therefore, I tell you that I have no inspiration and passion to use English in here.
>
> (Meaw, interview)

The question of low motivation to use English due to the lack of support and resources was echoed by Chartchai:

> I am not motivated to use English in my classroom because it increases my workload to get in charge of students' classroom behaviours and translate English into Thai for my students. I think it does not make sense to do things for two rounds. Also, you can hear other teachers talking to their students in Thai in the classrooms surrounding me. I do not intend to compare with others, but it is the fact that most teachers have no passion to speak English.
>
> (Chartchai, interview)

There were virtually no English-language resources available to students in the teacher–participants' classrooms. Instead, instructional materials were almost entirely in Thai, including textbooks, worksheets and other curriculum resources. The lack of English-based resources in the classroom exacerbated the reluctance of teachers and students to use English (Duran & Sert, 2019; Tonio & Ella, 2019), which was neither heard nor seen in the classroom. For example, Meaw reflected:

> I have used Thai textbook in mathematics because there is no mandatory in the use of instructional media in English. We are allowed to choose teaching materials to be flexible in the teaching and learning. Therefore, I have no need to use English instructional media and I think that is really because of my dislike because English is difficult for me.
>
> (Meaw, interview)

Similarly, Beota chose to avoid English-based classroom resources due to her lack of confidence in their use, claiming "I am afraid of using instructional media in English with my students, which is why I always use Thai". Although Namthip's science textbooks included some English terms (e.g., electric circuit, electrostatic and conductor), Namthip did not draw students' attention to these words nor explain their pronunciation. Namthip explained that she and her students struggled with English terminology, so she avoided it wherever possible. Macaro and Han (2020) argued that professional development can help to support teachers with using English-language resources in the classroom. However, the teacher–participants in this study were not able to access targeted professional development to support their use of English.

Theptida explained that there are limited classroom resources that combine English and Thai for primary curriculum. Additionally, she argued that "it is probably hard to use purely English instructional media in primary schools, especially in rural schools like mine. Even though we just use Thai, I have a headache almost every day from explaining content to my students". Although there is evidence that dual-language instructional media improve students' subject knowledge and language competencies (e.g., Jiang et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2020), the lack of suitable English-language resources and the reluctance to use them, combined with the absence of professional development, motivation and confidence worked against the use of English as a language of instruction.

Lack of Clarity in School Policies

A further issue for teacher–participants was the lack of clarity in school policies regarding the use of English as a language of instruction. While the promotion of English through clear policies has been shown to improve student language learning (e.g., Han et al., 2019; Mukminin et al., 2019), across the participating schools, there were no evident policies that promoted communicative English in practice, which exacerbated the teacher–participants' reluctance and avoidance of English in the classroom (Meyerhöffer & Dreesmann, 2019). For example, Beota reflected:

> There is no policy to seriously use English in my school. There is only word of mouth that English should be used in school to stimulate the use of English for students. The problem with the policy of using English in my school is that even if the principal has set a policy to communicate in the school, most of teachers will question whether the principal can use English to communicate with other people or not.
>
> (Beota, interview)

Similarly, Chartchai claimed that "since I have taught at this school, I have seen no policy in the use of English in school". Going further, Chartchai argued that school-level policy requires the support of district and national-level policies, which do not appear to be in place, or at least are not clearly articulated to schools and teachers. As such, the lack of clear implementation of English language policies reduces the opportunities for teachers and students to promote effective communicative English across the school, both in and out of class (Bamgbọṣe, 2019). When describing the obstacles to effective policy articulation, Meaw explained:

> There have never been a policy to use English in my school. In most cases, the director says that our school should use English to communicate in the school such as greeting, ordering and requesting. I think that even if the school director had a clear policy on using English, the teachers in the school are not likely to use English because most teachers are not willing or not happy to use English This is because they do not have English proficiency and do not like English anyway, which results in a challenge with the idea of having a policy of English language use in schools.
>
> (Meaw, interview)

Meaw's comments go to the heart of the issue, in that the lack of clear policy direction apart from the general encouragement of English as a language of instruction sets up a context for avoidance and disengagement. Without clear leadership and policy intent, it is little wonder that teachers working in rural and disadvantaged school contexts are unable and unwilling to meaningfully engage with English in their classrooms. The combination of unclear policies and school administrators working in rural schools who might also struggle with English proficiency sets up a wicked policy problem for English language learning in these contexts (Sah, 2022).

Limited Availability of Professional Learning for Teachers in Rural Schools

Professional learning opportunities can provide teachers with important interpersonal and communicative skills, including increased collaboration, solidarity and sense of belonging in addition to the direct curriculum and pedagogical knowledge (e.g., Lofthouse, 2019; Nakajima & Goode, 2019; Turner et al., 2020). However, the teacher–participants reported that they felt there were limited opportunities to engage in meaningful professional development due to heavy workloads and time constraints, as well as geographical and funding restrictions, which made it challenging to engage in professional development in their rural school contexts.

While Theptida undertook some university studies in using English as a language of instruction, the lack of ongoing professional learning opportunities combined with the lack of use of English in the classroom made it difficult:

> I never think I have to use English to teach mathematics because students may think why do they have to use English in the classroom. Mathematics content itself is difficult. I used to enrol in a course of English for mathematics when I was a bachelor student. I almost forget all that content in English because I seldom use it in my classroom now. However, I think a training course in using English for specific teaching subjects such as mine (mathematics) would help teachers to be able to use English in their classrooms.
>
> (Theptida, interview)

Noom-ura (2013) argued that targeted professional development is critical to support teachers in the use of English. The teacher–participants recognised this need and referred to it regularly in interviews. For example, Namthip reflected "I think it would be useful for me to have a person to train me to use English. I understand how good professional development can support our teaching, but I have never participated in English professional development". There is a clear need for targeted professional development opportunities for teachers, especially those working in rural school contexts.

In addition to the lack of formalised professional learning available to teachers working in rural schools, teacher–participants also reported that there were few opportunities for informal professional learning, particularly engaging with English teachers to develop collective approaches to the use of English as a language of instruction (Castro & Villafuerte, 2019). For example, Beota claimed:

> One of the factors that makes it a challenge to use English in my school is the ignorance and solidarity of teachers. That is to say, each teacher is in charge of their own teaching subject. We never have any discussions to use basic English. For example, there is no talking about use of English words either during lunch time or at school meetings. Further, English teachers have not demonstrated that they are committed to developing and promoting the use of English in this school with colleagues.
>
> (Beota, interview)

The issue of cooperation and collaboration between classroom teachers was also raised by Tatsaya, who explained:

> I think one of the important things that makes it challenging to use English is the unity of teachers in schools that have to cooperate in using English throughout the school. My school has three English major teachers, but I have not received any of sharing ideas of promoting English in the classroom and in the school from them. Moreover, I used to talk with other teachers about using English in the school, although they told me that they cannot speak English and some of them are afraid of English. A teacher said that I am too old to learn English. I think these issues can cause a lack of harmony in the use of English in my school.
>
> (Tatsaya, interview)

The lack of professional learning opportunities is closely linked to the lack of clear policies and leadership within schools and at the broader levels of districts and national educational authorities. The challenges to using English as a language of instruction faced by the teacher–participants seemed insurmountable, so it was easier for them to stick with Thai as the language of instruction. A genuine commitment to professional development is required, including investment by local and national education leaders to ensure that teachers who are expected to use English as a language of instruction across the curriculum are able to do so.

DISCUSSION

There is an evident disconnect between the Ministry of Education's (2008; 2014) increasing focus on the bilingual approach to curriculum through using Thai and English as languages of instruction across the curriculum in all Thai schools and the practices and policies for teaching and learning at the school level. This project examined the experiences of non-English major teachers working in rural schools to better understand the challenges they faced in using English as a language of instruction. There is a well-documented link between teachers' language proficiency and motivation, and how students engage with and learn language (e.g., Castro & Villafuerte, 2019; Faez et al., 2021; Russell, 2017; Tekin & Garton, 2020). Therefore, the path to improving student outcomes in terms of English language proficiency is through the targeted support and development of teachers' knowledge, skills and dispositions to use English as a language of instruction across the curriculum. This is especially important for teachers living and working in rural contexts, who are unable to easily access professional development opportunities that are more available in urban areas.

This project demonstrated that the most significant challenge for teachers using English was the almost total reliance on Thai as the sole language of instruction. While there is a clear place for first language instruction when explaining new ideas for students or working with complex and abstract concepts (Surjowati & Siswahjudioko, 2020), the sole use of Thai

as the language of instruction forecloses the possibility of increasing familiarity and fluency of English for both teachers and students (Beisenbayeva, 2020; Franz & Teo, 2018; Noom-ura, 2013). The teacher–participants in this study demonstrated reluctance and avoidance as the main responses to English as a language of instruction, which suggests that more needs to be done to support teachers such as these, who work in rural and disadvantaged schools.

The lack of resources, clear policies and professional learning opportunities work to exacerbate the problem for teachers, who are expected to teach in English without any clear guidance nor support to do so. While there is a substantial body on the benefits of bilingual curriculum and translanguaging in classrooms (e.g., Beisenbayeva, 2020; Jiang et al., 2019; Oliver et al., 2021; Sah, 2022; Sibomana, 2022; Vogel & Garcia, 2017), without adequate policy mechanisms, resourcing and professional learning support in place, the potential of using English as a language of instruction cannot be realised. This will continue to have flow-on effects for the performance of Thailand on international English language comparisons, as well as on the unequal access and outcomes for school students who live in regional and rural areas.

Despite almost a decade following the adoption of the Common European Framework of References for Languages and support for communicative language teaching (Ministry of Education, 2014), it was evident that the teacher–participants in this study remained unable to use English as a language of instruction in their rural primary classrooms. The literature has demonstrated a range of benefits from using communicative language teaching (e.g., Franz & Teo, 2017; Hengsadeekul et al., 2014; Noom-ura, 2013), yet there have been limited opportunities to engage in these approaches in rural and disadvantaged classrooms. Providing clear policy frameworks for teachers that promote effective communicative English in practice (e.g., Han et al., 2019; Meyerhöffer & Dreesmann, 2019; Mukminin et al., 2019) would help school leaders to identify opportunities for targeted professional learning and resourcing support for their teachers.

A key finding of this project was that coaching and mentoring are effective professional development strategies to help support non-English major teachers working in rural schools to be more confident and motivated to use English as a language of instruction across the curriculum (see Uthaikun, 2021). This paper has presented key themes that arose from interviews undertaken with the teacher–participants, including the use of Thai as a language of instruction; lack of resources and support for the use of English as a language of instruction; lack of clarity in school policies; and limited availability of professional learning for teachers in rural schools.

The main limitations of the study included its small scale, being a qualitative case study of the experiences of 10 non-English major teachers working in rural schools in Thailand, which meant that there is limited generalisability from the findings, and that there were significant language barriers faced by the teachers in the use of English both in their classrooms and in the project. To overcome the limitation posed by language, the first author conducted all interviews in Thai, which were then translated into English during

the transcription process for coding and thematic analysis. To mitigate potential bias or loss of data veracity in translation, the first author shared the original interview transcripts and key themes in Thai with the teacher–participants.

CONCLUSION

Given the ongoing issue of poor national performance on English proficiency tests and rankings, such as the English Proficiency Index (Education First, 2021), maintaining the status quo is not going to achieve change. The widening gaps in access and opportunity for students in urban and rural schools also requires careful consideration by education policymakers and school leaders. Teachers working in rural and disadvantaged schools require clearer policy guidelines and leadership, appropriate resourcing and professional learning support to increase their skills and knowledge in communicative language teaching, bilingual curriculum planning and translanguaging pedagogies. Addressing each of these aspects concurrently will provide the Thai education system with a set of tools to tackle the issues of poor English language proficiency and inequitable schooling access and outcomes for students who live in rural and disadvantaged communities.

While this study was conducted in a rural context in Thailand, there are several implications for other contexts in which English is encouraged as an additional language of instruction. If teachers are expected to teach students in a language other than their first language, they should receive quality ongoing professional development and support to do so, such as coaching and mentoring programs. If teachers are not language proficient, it is challenging for them to engage in the process, so there needs to be carefully scaffolded supports in place. Teacher confidence and motivation to teach in another language is affected if language proficiency and support is not available. Further, teachers need to be able to engage with and understand the cultural relevance of teaching in another language. English-centric instruction may likely ignore specific cultural nuances that are needed for effective learning with non-English native speakers. It is also important that teachers consider the identities and inclusion of their students, who can feel a lack of a sense of belonging when speaking other languages, particularly if they have difficulties such as language disorders. Using English as a further language of instruction may also pose certain pedagogical challenges. For example, they may find adapting to other teaching methods that engage students from diverse cultural backgrounds challenging.

Despite the challenges and complexities, there are benefits to using English as an additional language of instruction, so assisting teachers to do so is important for various reasons. These include the fact that students and teachers will be able to communicate globally, which increases their capacity to sustain connections with people from many different countries and backgrounds. Learning English also allows people to access a different range of resources in areas of interest and can reportedly increase opportunities of employment globally. While there are many challenges in using English as a language of instruction, learning English can also improve cognitive abilities, especially when sharing this knowledge with others.

Finally, leveraging the positive outcomes of learning another language can ensure greater inclusivity and effective educational practices across many different contexts.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval was provided by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (ref#H19REA022).

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