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# Higher education management in Thailand: insights from directors of Language Institutes

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**Abstract**

Thailand has made English instruction compulsory at all levels of the education system, including the tertiary level. In order to manage the logistics of teaching sometimes thousands of students from a variety of faculties, many Thai universities establish organizations, commonly termed 'language institutes' or 'language centers'. Despite the prevalence and size of these organizations, little research has been done into their management, and their managers. This research thus investigates the management experiences, styles and opinions of 11 language institute directors throughout Thailand as part of a preliminary study. The findings indicate that directors share similar attitudes and experiences, including some forms of resistance, awareness of cultural norms regarding age and status acceptance of the temporariness of the job, high levels of administrative work, and acknowledgement of co-dependency in their team.

***Keywords:*** *higher education management, management styles, English language teaching, language institutes*

## 1. Introduction

English is a mandated subject at all levels of education in Thailand. At the tertiary level, all students must study the language as part of their General Education component of all undergraduate degrees. This generally entails that students complete 4 courses of approximately 45 hours per course. While many tertiary institutes comply with this requirement by assigning teachers from the 'regular' degree-offering faculties or departments (usually English or linguistics departments) to teach the General English courses, many other universities have created separate and independent departments, generally known as Language Institutes or centers, to cater to high numbers of students, often numbering in the thousands, requiring English instruction per semester.

Despite the effort and attention committed to English language instruction, English remains a major weakness in the Thai population. It is not uncommon for students who have spent up to 12 years of study to enter university as 'false beginners' requiring remedial English. With only four courses of formal instruction ahead of them, it is little wonder that these students graduate with very little improvement. As such, there are frequent media reports of the latest international and regional English competence rankings which invariably show Thailand at an embarrassingly low position. For example, in 2010 the results of the global internet and paper-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score revealed that Thailand ranked 116$^{th}$ of 163 nations (ETS, 2010). Likewise, the 2012 Education First English Proficiency Index ranked Thailand in 53$^{rd}$ place out of 54 countries compared, and evaluated Thailand as having 'very low proficiency' – the lowest of five proficiency levels (EF EPI, 2012).

While it is not within the scope of this research to examine the reasons for the poor level of English in Thailand, particularly given the importance the nation does place on it, the situation does of course reflect and impact how English instruction is delivered, organized and managed. It is with this in mind that the focus of this research is the management of language institutes in Thai tertiary education organizations. This study will examine the management of (English) language institutes in universities. It proposes to identify the nature of managing language institutes in public and private tertiary education organizations in Thailand by exploring the experiences and perspectives of their directors.

## 2. Background

In order to allow for comparison and contextualization of the findings, it is necessary to summarize a range of management related literature and research. First, a brief overview of management, and in particular the concept of management style, is provided. Then, relevant literature and research concerning higher education management is summarized. Finally, there will be a review of recent literature and research

concerning Asian and Thai management practices and styles.

2.1 Management and management styles

As one might expect, the study of management and leadership is quite a mature field, and many researchers have aimed to identify and define management styles. The resulting nomenclature therefore varies from author to author. However, some of the canonical categorizations or descriptions of management style include Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973), who delineate 7 discrete actions among a 'continuum of styles', Steinmetz and Hunt (1974), who also list 7 styles of management, and Dubrin (2007), who describes 5 styles. These authors revolve around a relatively common set of definitions or categorizations of management style, with individual but slight modifications or additions, but which can be summarized as the table below shows:

**Table 1** Management styles and their basic definitions

| ***Style*** | ***Basic definition*** |
|---|---|
| *autocratic* | taking full control without consultation |
| *authoritarian* | making most decisions although some may be made following consultation with senior managers |
| *democratic* | arriving at decisions through majority rule |
| *participative* | allowing lower level managers to make most of the decisions, and acting more as facilitators |
| *bureaucratic* | somewhat like autocratic management, but deriving authority from corporate policies and rules; implementing decisions handed down the hierarchy |

Other models will be discussed below.

2.2 Asian and Thai management

There is also sizeable corpus on 'Asian' management styles. When comparing management across cultures, the model devised by Geert Hofstede is arguably the most recognized (Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede's (1980) original four dimensions of cultural difference – individuality, power distance, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance, to which long-term orientation was later added and even more recently indulgence are used to quantify cultural differences. A click on Hofstede's online 'cultural compass tool' shows that Thailand scores comparatively highly in terms of power distance (meaning that Thais tend to accept a large degree of inequality), and uncertainty avoidance (meaning that Thais tend to fear the unknown and ambiguous situations), and is considered low in terms of individuality (meaning that Thais are more interdependent on others and do not wish to 'stand out' from others) and masculinity (meaning that Thais place more emphasis on caring and quality of life) (The Hofstede Centre, http://geert-hofstede.com/thailand.html). This has been corroborated by a number of researchers (e.g. Boonyachai, 2011).

Indeed, most research concerning Thailand has focused on the cross-cultural dimension of management (e.g. Kamoche, 2000; Onishi, 2011) or on workplace values (e.g. Komin, 1990). In other instances, the focus of research is on employees. For example, Pimpa and Moore (2012) compare organisational culture and leadership style preferences between Australian and Thai public sector workers, concluding that Thai public sector workers generally prefer task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership, whereas Australians prefer participative, more egalitarian and supportive leadership styles. In the case of Thai workers, Pimpa and Moore conclude that these preferences are related to uncertainty avoidance and conflict avoidance.

Thus, there is relatively little literature available in English concerning management styles and behaviours of Thai managers *per se*, with the exception of 'how-to' books and websites on managing people in Thailand, targeted to the general (expatriate) public (e.g. Holmes, Suchada, & Tomizawa, 1995). This may be explained by the assumption perhaps that expatriates come to Thailand as executives and need to know how to manage local staff, rather than what to expect from their Thai bosses. Of the Thai-based research, Runglertkrengkrai and Engkaninan (1987) study managerial behavior in Thailand through the lens of Thai culture and religious beliefs. They note that Thai cultural values have traditionally emphasized genial relationships, a love of fun, leading to an 'abhorrence of hard work', and inner freedom. And while the authors identify numerous Buddhist principles and precepts which can be

applied to managerial and leadership behavior, they concur with Nakata (1986), who concludes that Thai executives do 'not understand genuine Buddhist doctrine and could not adapt the tenets of Buddhism to their careers' (Runglertkrengkrai & Engkaninan, 1987, p. 12).

At the same time, there has been a divergence in values between urban and rural Thais, with urban Thais increasingly adopting more Western values such as accomplishment, self-reliance, responsibility and, ultimately, self-centeredness. In their study therefore, Runglertkrengkrai and Engkaninan note that all the executives had tertiary education, with a high percentage having been educated abroad, and moreover that even in Thailand business education uses or adapts Western books. These facts, they argue, have undoubtedly influenced Thai managerial concepts so that there is currently a blending of managerial styles with emphasis given both to interpersonal and task-based orientations.

In a survey of management styles of executives in stock exchange listed companies in Thailand, Wattanasupachoke (2006) finds that 'human skills', referring to interaction and communication, are considered most important in Thai companies. The roles managers emphasize most are 'negotiator' and providing direction to staff. High emphasis is given to maintaining harmony, which reflects Thai cultural values (and embodies conflict avoidance), and unity of direction.

In sum, of the little research conducted (in English), evidence points to the manager's emphasis on social harmony, staff happiness and a blend of Eastern and Western managerial practices, behaviors and perspectives.

### 2.3 Higher education management

Managers, at least up to a certain level, effectively assume two roles, that of administrator and that of educator. As a result, they inevitably deal with distinct and often conflicting challenges. This is especially true in recent times during which significant transformations have taken place, primarily as a consequence of government-led policy changes. For example, in the UK, USA and Australia, governments have placed greater pressure on universities by demanding more 'access and participation in higher education, more efficient and effective governance and administration, more accountability, and resource constraints' (Pearson & Trevitt, 2004, p. 88).

All of these demands have resulted in universities adopting the discourses, practices and ideologies of the business world. Central to this shift has been the move towards what is termed 'managerialism' (Randle & Brady, 1997a; 1997b; Trowler, 1998; Holloway, 1999), which Randle and Brady (1997b) characterize as a 'generic package of management techniques' and which include, among others, strict financial management, emphasis on productivity, use of quantitative performance indicators, and the development of consumerism and the discipline of the market.

Amounting therefore to a kind of paradigm shift in education, this has led to what various authors consider an identity crisis among higher education managers. Gleeson and Shain (1999; 2003) for example, call the dual pressures between the pedagogical values of the traditional university and the new market-oriented university an ambiguity that has 'driven a wedge' between lecturers who maintain the traditional values and higher education (HE) managers who are now pressured to promote the 'managerial bottom line' (Gleeson & Shain, 1999, p. 461).

This sense of ambiguity or identity crisis is in fact a common theme in HE management studies (e.g. Elliot, 1996; Briggs, 2001; Hellawell & Hancock, 2003; Pearson & Trevitt, 2004; Kok, Douglas, McClelland, & Bryde, 2010). In their study, Hellawell and Hancock (2003) explore the nature of being a middle manager in a 'new' university in the UK, and highlight the dilemmas and difficulties these managers face, particularly focusing on the complex relationship between managers and academic staff. Most significant among the complexities is that, while they have been supposedly empowered and indeed required by upper administrations to exert more managerial or hierarchical control, managers actually have to deal with more traditionally democratic and collegial-based politics at the staff level. Managers are faced with academic staff – particularly long term staff – who are subversive, non-compliant, resistant to change, difficult, and pursuing their own agendas rather than complying with the university's agenda. They are, as Gleeson and Shain (2003) note, 'squeezed from the top and from underneath' (p. 233). Consequently, tasks such as policy setting and decision making are

slow and frustrating experiences for managers, who additionally feel they have 'very few sanctions of any kind available to them when dealing with the full-time academic staff nominally under their control' (Hellawell & Hancock, 2003, p. 259). Ultimately, they conclude that middle managers 'are more vulnerable than the staff they manage' (ibid.) in terms of job security.

In terms of identity then, mid-level higher education managers are in the unique, some might say strange or even conflicting position of often having two roles: teacher and manager. This is because a large portion of middle managers have moved through the ranks from teaching to managing. As a result, there are unique perspectives and dynamics involved in both these positions, and higher education managers must balance them both. Damien Page (2011) has generated a typology of positions, or identities that education middle managers assume in light of their often conflicted roles as both educators and administrators. He bases these on religious metaphors:

1. Fundamentalists who continue to consider themselves primarily as teachers and thus prioritize students.
2. Priests who still focus on students but also aim to develop their teams and seek to ensure their well-being.
3. Converts who prioritize their administrative responsibilities and the organization's needs.
4. Martyrs who aim to balance all of the positions equally.

It is, in sum, an important time to study higher education management and its complexities.

*2.3.1 Higher education management in Thailand*

To the researcher's knowledge, very little research has been conducted, in English, which focuses specifically on the management of higher education institutes in Thailand. Of the few papers concerned with the topic, Cheaupalakit (2002), using Bass and Avolio's Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ, 1995 version), concludes that Thai higher educational managers emphasize contingency reward as a management style, followed by total transformational leadership, meaning that leaders 'build personal and social identification among followers with the mission and goals of the leader and organization' (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003, p. 209).

The researcher was unable to find research related to the management of language institutes in Thailand.

## 3. Purpose of research

The author wished to explore the experiences and perceptions of middle managers in Thai post-compulsory education. The research questions focused on areas related to management, and some of the guiding areas to be examined included: what experiences have managers had in their tenure as leaders? How do managers identify themselves? What are their general management styles, and how do they compare to previous findings, both internationally, and in Thailand? What, if any, are some issues and problems in managing language institutes and foreign staff (or in the case of foreign managers, with managing Thai staff)?

## 4. Methodology

After an internet-based search of universities around the country, the researcher identified the current directors of language institutes, with 11 directors granting permission an interview, via e-mail, and subsequently on the interview date, prior to commencing the actual interview.

While the researcher aimed to sample only the directors of public universities and private universities, there was one exception with the inclusion of the director of the General English program from a private technical college, the interviewer incidentally being the only foreigner interviewed.

Time constraints did not allow the researcher to conduct more interviews to be able to make the claim of having reached 'data saturation' as has become an established practice in qualitative interview-based research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Nonetheless, recent research has also shown that the saturation point is reached after just 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), making the sample size in this research at least respectable.

The interviews were conducted *in situ*, and had a semi-structured format. Questions were developed around 5 main topics and themes. In order, these were, 1) general experiences, work

history and profile; 2) management style; 3) vision and change; 4) impressions and perceptions of ELT in Thailand and 5) Language Institutes as multi-cultural workplaces. Some subtopics included staff resistance, inter-office communication and motivation. (As the author was also a Language Institute director, the questions were generated from a mix of the management related literature, but were also based on personal and collegial interest.) As they were semi-structured, the interviews developed in various directions, with topics being explored in follow-up questions relative to the interest of the responses given. Interview times therefore lasted from one to three hours and were recorded using an MP3 player recording device. The recordings were then transcribed using Express Scribe software and transcripts were analyzed and thematically coded.

## 5. Results

In this paper four themes are presented: general experiences, management styles, visions concerning change and development of their organizations and thoughts on ELT in Thailand.

### 5.1 General experiences of language institute (LI) managers

In this part of the investigation the researcher aimed to identify some general impressions and backgrounds of the interviewees.

#### *5.1.1 Obtaining the position*

There seemed to be two predominant paths to becoming a university manager, depending on the nature of the organization. In public universities, directors were voted by the faculty and subsequently approved by senior management.

In private universities and organizations however, managers were selected and offered the job by senior management. These newly installed managers were long-term employees or in two cases invited from outside the university, via previous acquaintance.

In public universities directors are rotated more frequently, with terms lasting 2-3 years, while some universities put also a cap on the number of terms often with a maximum of only two terms permitted.

Of note is that none of the directors actually applied for or seemed to have actively pursued their appointments, and none of the directors appeared to be 'ladder-climbing': instead, they viewed their appointment as a matter of duty and loyalty to the organization. Indeed, directors were in some cases initially reluctant to accept promotion, and then expected to be rotated or to step down in future to continue academic interests.

#### *5.1.2 Prior training*

Virtually none of the directors had formal training in management prior to their obtaining the position. Training is given via workshops and meetings following appointment to management. There was unison in the opinion that management is best learned on the job and that it comes down to 'common sense', or that one can only learn to manage by dealing with issues specific to their organization. When asked what kind of training they would like, only two answered that training in Human Resources management would help.

#### *5.1.3 Identity and perspective on role(s) and responsibilities*

Given that the directors had all started their careers as teachers, the researcher asked what role they identified with more: administrator or teacher. Most managers identified themselves as administrators, although they commensurately emphasized that teaching took up a lot of time - up to 22 hours per week in one case. Two managers continued to think of themselves as teachers foremost. One director preferred to describe herself as coordinator: 'I'm not the head, not the boss. Every time I act as the boss, someone will hate me' [laughs] (Interviewee 2).

Metaphorical self-descriptions included 'captain of ship', 'conductor' and 'brand ambassador', and in keeping perhaps with the Thai emphasis on good relations and social harmony, a number of managers described themselves as '(elder) sisters'.

In terms of roles and responsibilities there was understandably quite a strong and common trend in their perceptions. In general, the directors identified three main roles: 1) to pursue (the university's) goals, 2) to initiate new projects and 3) to guide their subordinates to completing both. Two of the interviewees made the distinction between the role of manager and that of leader, one of whom held a negative view of the managerial role and noted that she no longer wanted to be a manager, which entailed 'planning, supervising,

controlling budgeting, strategic thinking' and that instead s/he preferred more 'vision related' pursuits.

Another responsibility for at least two of the directors was to increase student numbers, and despite the different sources of income between public and private institutions this was not restricted to the directors employed in private organizations only.

5.2 Management styles

Interviewees were both directly and indirectly asked about what they considered to be their management styles with respect to Dubrin's categorizations and some described themselves as 'mixed' or 'democratic' in their leadership, but also 'confessed' (given the negative connotations of this category) to resorting to being autocratic in some regards.[1]

The interviewer therefore focused on the types of actions and behaviours that are considered to represent various management styles and noted comments during the interview that related to or were indicative of varying styles and attitudes. As such, four main areas were examined: communication; attitudes to staff and staff motivation/appraisal and work ethic/philosophy.

*5.2.1 Meetings and day-to-day communication*

In order to further gain insight into management styles, the researcher asked managers about their communication with staff. Of particular interest to the researcher was the degree of dialogue and discussion present in meetings, with the researcher asking how much lecturers participated and engaged in discussion. Although the directors claimed that general meetings did feature discussions and questions, they also conceded that staff did not often openly disagree, and that most of the time there was agreement. Two directors attributed this 'agreement' to what might be considered a Thai cultural trait, namely preserving the leader's face. In both of these cases the lecturers would speak to the director's inner circle of confidants, who would then represent these voices of disagreement. One director noted:

> I used to be like 'why? why don't they talk to me?' because I open the floor you can discuss and you don't need to, after the meeting you don't need to get into the group and discuss and say 'no I don't like it'…I think it's too dramatic. But now I'm ok as long as everybody agrees and works further, go ahead (Interviewee 2).

Age and seniority seemed to play a role in the nature of meetings, with directors acknowledging that staff might be afraid to comment or disagree publicly with them. Another director noted the distinction between his/her meetings, in which she felt lecturers were comfortable engaging in discussion, and the meetings conducted by his/her predecessor, which were marked by silence. This was attributed to the seniority of the predecessor.

*5.2.2 Attitudes to staff*

That their institutes required a high degree of team work was perhaps the most enduring theme of the interviews, and the majority of managers were emphatic regarding the importance of their teams' support in succeeding in their work. Stating it simply, one director noted a common refrain among all the managers:

> I'm quite lucky because I have people who help me a lot. Running a school you cannot run it alone (Interviewee 7).

Another noted:

> We need to build team work a lot. I need to encourage them, support them. I cannot work alone. If they collapse, I collapse too (Interviewee 2).

Most of the managers had empathy for their lecturers with regard to their workloads. Those they praised the most were staff who they worked most directly with – the inner circle – as well as secretarial staff. In particular, staff members who completed the documentation required for Quality Assurance and other forms of record keeping were given high praise.

At the same time however there were some frustrations, and these had to do primarily

[1] They were indirectly asked on the assumption that it would not be a fruitful approach to questioning, and this did turn out to be the case: such categories, while seeming theoretically feasible, simply were not applicable to the complex realities of management, which cannot always adhere to exclusively to one style of management.

with the perception that lecturers had no initiative or motivation to do anything other than teach, despite mounting pressure from senior management that they engage in other activities. Numerous managers thus commented to the effect that if they did not keep constant pressure to improve, or to pursue new projects, their institute would stand still:

- If I didn't do anything for the Language Center they are going to be the same thing forever and they are going to be a lecturer for English language class forever (Interviewee 2).
- I always tell them that I do everything for them. So if they don't respect me it's like they don't respect themselves. In this place, it seems like if I don't do just one thing, it will miss quite a lot of things (Interviewee 11).

Directors also saw their staff as the biggest challenge, if not obstacle, to pursuing the organization's missions and goals, and complained about their lack of ambition in this regard:

- When it comes to teachers in general I think that, I would say percentage wise, I don't think that…less than half would really abide whatever mission and vision (Interviewee 1).
- I want them to devote their time to …to be happy. To enjoy, to see the common goal. More than this. Right now….it's like sabai [take it easy]…they do their job, but they don't have a common goal (Interviewee 10).

Another concern was the lack of research being conducted. In addition to providing workshops and seminars, three of the directors had gone so far as to make offers of financial reward (beyond that offered by the university in the form of research grants), reflecting the contingent reward approach to management. Despite this, none had taken the offer.

*5.2.3 Management in a Thai cultural context*

As a non-Thai, the researcher was able to identify comments made by interviewees as somewhat culturally unique or noteworthy from an etic perspective. Nonetheless, many of the interviewees' comments do seem to reflect findings from previous research on Thai and Asian management styles.

Above and beyond all other aspects that were noted by the researcher as being of a particularly Thai/Asian nature was the awareness and respect to age and age-related status. Indeed, eight of the ten Thai interviewees made comments in relation to their age in relation to their subordinates, whether it was comments regarding being 'elder sisters', or more specifically and explicitly, comments which revealed culturally-defined rather than workplace-defined hierarchies. That is, directors made note of their power (or lack thereof) to manage and direct subordinates in terms of their age rather than their position. Almost all of the younger directors (below 45) had experienced difficulties with teachers older than them, particularly at the outset of their managerial appointments:

- During the first year we have senior teachers and they (were) quite difficult [for me]…they caused some problems (Interviewee 7).
- For the younger colleagues I can talk to them more frankly but for the senior colleagues I have to talk to them more indirectly (Interviewee 9).
- When I was head [of the English department] there were a lot of older teachers who worked for me and so I tried to motivate. And most of the time they did not [co-operate] and I tried to keep calm (Interviewee 11).

One director also somewhat reluctantly gave priority to seniors, as a matter of protocol:

> When I have to make a decision of something, I would give the priority to the senior first. And I am happy when they say no (Interviewee 6).

Conversely, senior directors made use of their seniority. In discussing an occasion when documentation was not correctly submitted to a younger colleague from another department, one director noted:

> Probably among the deans my friend and I are the oldest, and so we….refused to do it her way [laughter] (Interviewee 4).

Another strongly evident theme, also reflective of previous research findings, was happiness, conflict avoidance, or an emphasis on social harmony:

- And I thought they are the same age as me. I was expecting them to be like me too! I thought they are the same age as me why can't they do this? But you know, Thai culture, you just cannot burst your temper (Interviewee 2).
- So I always tell my people I want everyone happy working… you cannot squeeze [people] (Interviewee 4).

In reference to taking disciplinary action, one director touched on a number of topics simultaneously:

> And I think this is because we are in Thailand and in Thai society there's always that patron and client, brother-type of relationship, [a] compromising and non-confrontational approach that makes taking any disciplinary action very difficult (Interviewee 1).

Finally, in terms of power distance, managers recognized their status as boss and the effect this has on subordinates. Already mentioned examples include lecturers sending 'delegates' to argue a case of disagreement, or direct acknowledgement of this distance, which included social distance:

> Yes, they seem to be afraid to go to lunch with me (Interviewee 4).

*5.2.4 Management style and philosophy*

Participants were asked about their philosophy or approach to management. Salient and recurrent statements included those regarding delegating and sharing workloads with subordinates. In terms of delegating, two of the directors made efforts to distribute workloads to those who would enjoy the work assigned or who were strong in that area:

- I will let [them] do what they enjoy what they can. For other things I will do (Interviewee 11).

There was also a strong sense that it was important for directors to set an example to lecturers and staff, particularly by sharing the workload:

- I just try to…put the right person into the right job, and then I just do not let them work by themselves. I help with everything as much as I can and I do not just sit and wait for them to finish their work and report to me (Interviewee 3).
- Usually I wouldn't let them do it alone. I don't just assign them to do it but…if we have to write a test [for example] I would be with them. I would do that job too. I think they know that I wouldn't let them do the job alone (Interviewee 7).

In some senses however, this outlook appeared less motivated by beneficence as by a degree of impatience:

> So actually you know my philosophy would be if you want to get anything done you need to do it yourself first (Interviewee 9).

In sum, the management philosophy of the majority directors was that of being mindful of participating in the day-to-day work of their respective organizations. This may be because the directors had themselves 'come through the ranks' in the same organizations, and therefore were not only familiar with the work but had also been on (more) familiar and equal terms prior to their managerial appointments.

5.3 Change and organizational development

With regard to change, two sources were discussed: externally imposed changes, and thus the directors' responses to these changes, and the directors' own change initiatives as part of their strategic vision. Additionally, the research explored any resistance to change that directors had experienced.

*5.3.1 Change and change management*

One of the most significant forms of externally imposed change in recent times has been various quality assurance measures devised by government ministries. Such concerted and standardized quality assurance (QA) systems are relatively new in Thai higher education (though some might say it has arrived with a vengeance!). There are currently two major forms of QA evaluation, known as SAR and Sor Mor Sor. These forms of evaluation entail a considerable addition to the workload of a university faculty, and directors and their team must spend considerable time not only preparing the documentation, but actually learning and interpreting what forms of documentation are required. The researcher therefore hoped to prompt the managers' attitudes concerning this area of change.

Unsurprisingly, some of the managers did have a strongly negative reaction, with three voicing an aversion to it on the grounds that it was 'boring', 'repetitive' and a 'waste of time'. One director had initially refused to comply with certain requirements but had since completed them. There was certainly skepticism in terms of its relevance, as demonstrated by one director's response to the requirement to have an action plan:

> Don't ask about the 'plan'. I don't even know if the staff will stay for a whole academic year (Interviewee 4)!

Some managers on the other hand seemed to have no objections to the paperwork, although these directors had delegated the bulk of the work to their secretaries and subordinates.

Other than the additional workload, one concern with Quality Assurance measures was the potential to affect the mindset of the organization, in the sense that managers would alter their ambitions and visions in order to 'score SAR points'. Thus, two directors noted that Quality Assurance could have a 'wash-back' effect:

> It's exactly like the wash-back effect. We just do what they want. We just do what the QA or what the SAR, what they…would expect us to include in our SAR. So now we have increased a lot of work so that we fulfill the requirements by the auditors (Interviewee 9).

Overall however, even those managers who had an initial skepticism to quality assurance measurements had in time come to appreciate that on some fronts it is useful as a guide to future improvement and development.

> It's an opportunity for our improvement because you see through all the year we did a lot of things, but we don't remember, but SAR helps us get more organized. 'Oh we did this?' I see it as an opportunity to improve (Interviewee 10).

In sum, while some of the director's had had some frustrations and negative reactions to Quality Assurance systems, all felt to some degree that there were benefits to trying to standardize and quantify higher education quality and its assessment and, save one initial refusal by one director to complete an action plan, none identified themselves as having been overtly or covertly resistant to complete Quality Assurance requirements – although of course there is little choice.

When it comes to changes that managers had themselves initiated, most of the directors had faced resistance or opposition during their term, but more in terms of the change they represented with their arrival, rather than any subsequent changes they made to the organization. Indeed, a common thread in the interviews was that many of the younger directors had endured somewhat of a 'baptism of fire' when first promoted, in particular from older faculty members, who did not comply with requests or participate in activities or other work requirements.

There were some forms of resistance to policy or strategic change however:

- I think it's being Thai, I guess almost everything is covert. And also being Thai all this covert resistance is usually done en masse (Interviewee 1).
- …it took me two years to actually talk to them. In the meetings I say 'we should do this we should do that'. If I force them, they will reject: no (Interviewee 2)!

All in all however, resistance to change did not figure as a central concern of the directors, and this may be associated with the high power distance.

*5.3.2 Vision*

Directors were also asked about their vision for their language institutes, and while they did articulate certain visions for their organizations, few of the directors offered concrete or 'unique' descriptions, that is to say, statements which in corporate terms would reflect brand building. Nonetheless, the various vision statements could be categorized in two broad ways: visions regarding internal development – particularly in terms of using technology – and those regarding the public's perception of their organization to enhance competiveness, as seen in the following statements:

- I would like the Language Institute to be a collection of good, effective English language teachers, and also a group of practical ELT researchers (Interviewee 1).
- My vision is to let everyone know we exist (Interviewee 3).
- [to be] capable in IT also …to make our teachers to be smart and [where] whatever we do is to make our students stronger and feel free to speak more English (Interviewee 6).
- I think we should be more IT based. We should make more use of technology to facilitate learning (Interviewee 9).
- I'd like the program to become (more) international; I'd like if our school is accepted by people (Interviewee 7).
- I want to see the LI to become like a premier language and cultural institute (Interviewee 10).

Interestingly, although these differing emphases might be thought to be reflective of the nature of the organization, i.e. public vs. private, this was not the case. Rather, the emphasis on public perception had more to do with moves to affiliate language institutes with international colleges, or to make language institutes themselves more international.

5.4 Issues specific to ELT organizations

In this part of the interview the discussion concerned issues specific to language institutes as well as the state of English competency and English language teaching in Thailand.

*5.4.1 State of English and ELT in Thailand*

The directors were presented with the statement that English is poor in Thailand compared to other Asian nations. The majority of the directors agreed with the statement, although a number questioned the validity of such findings (e.g. in some countries only 'good' students take the exams whereas in Thailand there might be more of a range of competencies). This low level of competence was certainly a source of frustration among directors.

At the same time, they all sympathized with the plight of Thai students, both in secondary and tertiary education. The majority of interviewees focused on the lack of opportunity to speak English in daily life and were focused on trying to increase the use of English outside class.

Other interviewees identified poor teacher training, while another identified a lack of standardization of learning materials:

> Like mathematics: we got a series of mathematics books, right? When the students go to this course, this course they know what to learn. But in English you can ask the teachers in different schools – they don't know. They don't say the same content.

> They will keep teaching what they want to teach. They will keep teaching what they have learned from a long time [ago], what they think is useful. But maybe it's not in sequence… (Interviewee 6).

The lack of seriousness accorded to the profession was highlighted by another:

> Take Singapore for example; they have engineers….many people change their jobs to become English teachers. Why? Because language teachers make more money! That is what we have to be very serious about. Take English instruction more seriously. Now we have been too slow already to react in terms of EI [English Instruction]… we do not seem to be following the world effectively. English has been taught or taken as a subject in school. We take it to pass the exams and then after high school you can hardly say 'hi' in English (Interviewee 4).

*5.4.2 Trends in pedagogy and teaching*

Directors were then asked if they had noticed any trends in ELT in Thailand in recent years. The most commonly mentioned trend was the adoption of computer or technology in classrooms, although the adoption of technology was not really spoken of in terms of its having genuine pedagogical value or benefit, but simply as part of the general educational trend. Additionally, technology was seen as solving logistical problems and the problem of lack of student motivation to learn English, rather than as a method to significantly improve student learning. At the same time, the adoption of technology had been relatively slow, and the administrators frequently mentioned the resistance of older teachers to adopt computer-based learning as part of their repertoire.

In terms of pedagogical approach then, none of the directors identified with conviction the use of a particular approach. Some commented that they were familiar with the formal approaches and methods of FLT, such as notional-functional, grammar translation and communicative language teaching (CLT), but interestingly, none of the directors subscribed to them, and instead there was a comfortable reliance on the use of commercial course books without necessarily showing concern or interest in the theoretical principles informing such publications.

Finally, few of the managers made any explicit and direct efforts to alter the lecturer's teaching approaches or methodologies. Indeed, at least two of the directors specifically noted that when it came to choosing course books they considered themselves as equals to the faculty and they did not see it as incumbent upon themselves to try to persuade the faculty to adopt any particular materials based on the conviction of their inherent pedagogical value.

*5.4.3 Language institutes as multi-cultural workplaces*

As language institutes are frequently staffed by foreign lecturers, there is naturally a multi-cultural dimension in these environments. Additionally, while it is a broad generalization, it is accepted that foreigners, particularly Westerners, are more direct and even confrontational than Thais in their communication styles, and this also carries over to relationships between superiors and subordinates.

With this in mind, the interviewer asked the directors about their experiences managing foreign lecturers. While one director noted that 'dealing with international teachers is very difficult; their attitudes and ways of thinking are very different from Thai teachers' (Interviewee 9), and most directors had had difficult incidents and experiences with foreign staff, the percentage did not appear to be much greater than problems they'd had with Thai staff, and directors generally acknowledged this. In terms of communication however, it was also acknowledged that in dealing with foreigners they had to be more direct or open. One interviewee comments on both of these aspects:

> If you are Thai or non-Thai you can cause problems; here we used to have a few teachers who always caused problems and they [were] Thai, and we have had native teachers who were also aggressive. So I think it's not about nationality (Interviewee 8).

With the assumption that the majority of expatriate teachers unable to read and write Thai, it is also an added burden to translate documents for them, and limits what foreigners can be asked to do with regard to helping with administrative work. There were therefore negative sentiments regarding the fair distribution of workload compared to salary, worsened by the observation that foreign teachers lack commitment. One director summarizes the main (negative) points regarding foreign teachers:

> They cannot help with the SAR for example, and they are not here long enough to publish anything …. But again we expected them to help with encouraging the students, participating in, let's say Christmas, and things like that; extra-curricular activities. But we didn't seem to get that…'*I'm here to teach so I teach and that's it*'. I mean, you have to want to do the job not just to be here just because you are married to a Thai girl [or] you are spending your pension years here and things like that (Interviewee 4).

Nonetheless, the directors were unanimous in their opinion that native speaking English teachers were important or very important to the organization: out of 9 interviewees informally presented with a scale of 1 to 10 regarding the importance of having natives (1 being 'not important at all', and 10 being extremely important), the average number was 8. When asked to provide what they thought was an ideal ratio of Thais to foreigners, six interviewees thought a 50% ratio would be ideal, with the other directors ranged the ideal number of foreign lecturers at 20% to 40% of the faculty.

## 6. Summary and discussion

The findings above highlight some of the shared as well as contrasting perspectives of the directors of tertiary organization language institutes. In terms of broadly shared sentiments and experiences, some of the main ones include: absence of formal training in management; initial difficulties when assuming the role of manager; some forms of staff resistance often based on age-determined seniority; an emphasis on teamwork; acceptance and approval of newly mandated quality assurance measures and a strong commitment to the duties of their position while at the same time accepting and somewhat welcoming its temporality.

As for contrasting perspectives, the most evident was perhaps the range of opinions with regards to a vision for their respective language institute. While some directors were to some extent driven by a particular long term vision, others had none, or stated the achievement of a particular project or task as their vision, as opposed to describing an encompassing view of what their language institute should strive for. There were also differences in their understanding of the state of English competence in Thailand, with differing views concerning the level of English in the country, the source of the (assumed) low competence, and possible approaches to tackling the issue.

When viewed through the framework of culture, findings from previous research were mirrored and corroborated. For example, high power distance remained a feature of the organizations, although with the added complexity of age playing a role. This was evident among the younger directors (in their 30s and 40s) who had all at one stage – primarily at the beginning of their tenure – had to confront some forms of resistance from senior faculty members. In time however, these forms of resistance dissipated for various reasons (ranging from retirement of seniors or through keeping a mutual, silent distance from each other). Older directors in their 50s and 60s on the other hand were naturally less concerned about any older seniors, but were in turn aware of their age-based status, and acknowledged the social distance this may cause.

Nonetheless, although age is a powerful factor, young teachers are promoted to director positions. These promotions tend to be based on the teachers' qualifications: given that there is a relatively low proportion of doctoral degree holders among teaching staff, doctoral graduates are often quickly promoted to leadership positions requiring such academic qualifications.

Interestingly, this may be an aspect of some of the teachers' initial reluctance to become a manager. Recent doctoral graduates often identify themselves as academics and researchers, but then they are 'burdened' with a role in which such work must necessarily take lower priority. Having said

this, the managers did not struggle with the dual identity between traditional and managerial paradigm. This may be because, even though they lack managerial training in areas not traditionally associated with academic posts, such as marketing, the managerialist paradigm of the modern university is perhaps already well-entrenched. In terms of Page's taxonomy then, the directors seem to occupy either 'priest' or 'convert' roles.

Another interesting commonality was the complacency regarding their position, with almost all directors noting that they wouldn't mind stepping away from a managerial role and resuming the status of lecturer. Indeed a stated desire among a number of the directors was that they would be happy to step down when required so that they could focus on research and other personal development. It was noteworthy, then – perhaps from a cultural perspective – that there seemed to be no loss of face associated with being director and then 'descending' or 'demoting' to a non-managerial role (assuming that it was not a face saving strategy to say it didn't matter!). This may be for numerous factors, including the directors' age, the rotation-based structure of the position, meaning that the loss of face may be pre-emptively avoided, and finally because the reduction in workload would allow for further personal development. Ultimately then, the interviews seemed to evoke a strong sense that management and leadership roles are not coveted and pursued and the role of director seems to be understood as a duty rather than an achievement on a career trajectory.

In terms of problems facing language institutes – aside from the major problem of improving the students' English, particularly when they are taught in large classes! – the most frequently mentioned complaint was the lack of research and self-development that teachers pursued. Despite various and frequent efforts made by the directors, teaching staff continued to resist this expectation.

## 7. Limitations and future research

Given the paucity of research in the area of educational management in Thailand – not only in language institutes, but in academia in general, there is scope for a great deal more focused research. For example, while a number of models concerning leadership and management were referenced, future researchers may either select, adapt, or even create their own framework with which to investigate academic managers' styles, experiences and perceptions.

As this was a small scale interview-based research, future investigations could increase sample size, be geographically broadened, and include survey instruments so as to identify more factors and comparable variables. Additionally, the current research did not triangulate data, by examining, for example, documentation, or observing workplace procedures directly. This means for example, that the results are limited to the perceptions of the respondents only and cannot be verified, and that other factors – such as corporate culture and discourse community, the impact of organizational policies, personal histories between key players, even office layout and equipment (affecting for example, communication), can used to add depth to the findings. Such limitations could be corrected in a future, full-scale study. Topic wise, future investigations could examine strategies for successfully engaging staff in newly expected responsibilities, such as conducting research. Other research might focus on how large language institutes manage the transition from class-based learning to online learning, which was a common theme regarding organizational development.

## 8. Conclusion

This research served as a preliminary investigation of the directors of language institutes in Thailand. It revealed that managers in the education sector broadly share similar experiences and demonstrate management styles and values in keeping with those found in the broader Thai culture. Like in much of the world, the education sector is undergoing a transition, from traditional to market-based managerialism, yet managers do not have the identity crises as reported in other countries.

Finally, it is hoped that this and future research on what administrators experience and perceive may serve as an important source of information for education policy planners in particular in light of the urgent need to improve English proficiency of Thai graduates.

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