

# REDESIGNING COMPETENCY-BASED ESP CURRICULUM FOR AEC: A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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## Abstract

*Thailand has undergone continuing changes which affect all areas of education, including ESP education. To cope with all the changes including AEC in 2015, the ESP curriculum needs to be redesigned. This study was therefore to explore the perceptions and attitudes towards the redesigned English Business Communication. This study was based on triangulation. The instruments included an interview and a questionnaire. The subjects were 5 key informants whose main areas of expertise were ESP education, 70 graduates and students of English for Business Communication and 10 entrepreneurs. The informants were interviewed to elicit data for SWOT analysis while the graduates, the students and the entrepreneurs were surveyed through a questionnaire to elicit the data on the curriculum based on competency-based and holistic language learning. The SWOT analysis indicated that the redesigned curriculum should direct towards competence regarding to a combination of contents, skills and professional attitudes needed for effective communication and performance, a preparation for increased competition and changes, a response to internationalization, a shift from generalization to adaptive specialization, and sustainable quality orientation. The survey revealed that the respondents agreed that the curriculum could help prepare for AEC. The implication indicated that the ESP curriculum for changes should direct towards competency and the findings of this study will help facilitate further understanding and implementation of ESP in higher education. Future study should inquire the efficiency of this innovation.*

**Keywords:** *ESP education, AEC of 2015, curriculum, competition, communication.*

## Introduction

Thailand has undergone continuing changes at all levels. The changes affect all areas of education including English for Specific Purpose (ESP), as continued changes (e.g., globalization and digitalization) are not only influencing what we know and how we think and act but also affecting the role of education in society (Wals et al, 2012) note that. Therefore, to prepare for all changes especially ASEAN Community in 2015, the ESP curriculum needs to be redesigned.

What direction will fit for the change? Literature review indicated that the competency-based education would fit for the contexts of changes in the real world especially the forthcoming AEC for several reasons. First, the competence-

based education is relevant to society (Grant et al, 1979), as it contextualizes social changes. Second, the educationist performance-oriented, especially inspired by studies on competence-profiles for top-performers (Boyatzis, 1982) as the core competence of the organization (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Third, the education integrates training, education and development into the curriculum/program, as it was used in teacher training (Arends, Masla&Weber, 1971) with the emphasis on observable performance that students are required to perform according to the pre-defined competencies. Fourth, the education is based on integrated occupationalism which integrates knowledge, skills and attitudes in the learning process and use more practical, comprehensive,

and authentic assessments to determine the mastery of profession (Wesselink, 2010). Lastly, the education is based on professional development in authentic working contexts, in which job holders learn from practice (Eraut, 2011).

What is the competency-based curriculum? It aims to equip students with knowledge, skills and professional attitudes which they can and learn to apply in authentic workplace contexts. The competencies are referred to as emerging transformative (Mulder, 2012). It is based on the transfer of dynamic competencies in real-world settings based on authentic tasks and issues that require knowledge-in-action. The ESP curriculum of the Department for English for Business Communication was therefore competency-oriented to prepare for the change.

What are distinguished features of the curriculum to cope with the change? First, the curriculum contextualizes changes and challenges. Since the graduates of the program have worked in business areas regarding to tourism and hospitality industries, entrepreneurial sectors and international business, the focus of this curriculum is on the authentic occupational contexts which keep changing rapidly. Therefore, the curriculum which is based on the context of changes will definitely fit to AEC and will also prepare the students for the regional labor market needs and competition.

Second, the curriculum highlights the strengths of the program. The curriculum is highlighted with more courses relating to trends and professions in business. In addition, this redesigned curriculum highlights the strengths of the former curriculum (i.e. training in a workplace). Since open market of AEC 2015 will accelerate the competition in the regional labor market, more training in a workplace is increased (from 200 hours to 300 hours) so that the students will gain real world professional experience more.

Third, the curriculum requires modern technological resources in all sub-

jects. The resources will facilitate learning and help overcome limitations of human resources. A major obstacle of the former curriculum was the fact that the teachers of English were not able to perform according to the pre-determined competencies of the former curriculum due to their workload, class size, professional and personal development and so on. The resources are a solution to the problem.

Fourth, the curriculum emphasizes on the importance to personal development based on lifelong learning. This concept fits the real world. The curriculum requires more project-based and problem-based learning, as such learning will cultivate positive attitudes toward autonomous learning by providing students opportunity to have a control over their learning process, starting from initiating learning from their own interests and going forward and backward at their own pace. This is a pathway to personal development and lifelong learning.

Fifth, the curriculum enhances holistic language learning. Since language use in the real world is holistic, this curriculum put emphasis on the integration of all the four skills and authentic materials. The variety of media and technology (e.g., the Internet) makes language learning authentic and natural like the language used in the real world. This is to prepare the students for the authentic workplace contexts in the future.

Lastly, it requires a competence-orientated assessment. Since the internship evaluation by the entrepreneurs indicated that the graduates and students of the program lack the competencies needed for good performance. This lack includes all these competencies: holistic communicative competence for professions, interdisciplinary problem-solving, interactive methods in conflict resolution, responsive actions regarding to professional needs and social responsibility in entrepreneurship. Therefore, this redesigned curriculum aims to assess the students' performance based on the compe-

tencies.

To assure that all these distinguished features of the curriculum can help to cope with the change, it was necessary to explore the perceptions of those who get involved (e.g., key informants, entrepreneurs, graduates and students) with the following two research questions and purposes of the study.

- How do the key informants whose main areas of expertise were language education perceive the competence-based learning?
- How do the graduates, students and entrepreneurs perceive the competence-based curriculum?

The main purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions towards the redesigned ESP business-based curriculum which included competence and holistic language learning. would be able to prepare for global and regional market changes, especially the forthcoming AEC in 2015.

## **Methods**

### **Subjects**

The subjects fell into three groups. The first one consisted of 5 highly qualified key informants whose main areas of expertise were ESP education or related fields. Their qualifications include doctoral degrees, academic titles, more than twenty years of teaching experience, and more importantly, an expertise as curriculum readers of various English language teaching programs in Thailand. The second one consisted of entrepreneurs, internship supervisors and employers from 10 organizations which offer training to the students such as tourism and hospitality industries, entrepreneurial sectors and international business. The last one consisted of 35 graduates and 35 fourth-year students of English for Business Communication.

### **Instruments**

The instruments to elicit data in-

cluded an interview and a questionnaire.

### **Interview**

The key informants were required to respond to the SWOT analysis of competence-based learning relating to research question 1.

1. What do you think are the strengths of competence-based learning?
2. What do you think are the weaknesses of competence-based learning?
3. What do you think are the opportunities of competence-based learning?
4. What do you think are the threats of competence-based learning?

### **Questionnaire**

The graduates and the students and entrepreneurs were required to respond to a questionnaire on five scales regarding to research question 2 as follows: very much, much, not sure, a little, and little. The questions drawn from the evaluation of the entrepreneurs as mentioned above in the last feature of the curriculum consisted of two main parts: competence-based curriculum and holistic language teaching/learning.

On competence-based curriculum, the questions included:

1. How much do you agree with the idea that holistic communicative competence is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC?
2. How much do you agree with the idea that interdisciplinary problem-solving is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC?
3. How much do you agree with the idea that interactive methods in conflict resolution are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC?
4. How much do you agree with the idea that responsive actions regarding to professional needs are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC?
5. How much do you agree with the idea that social responsibility in en-

preneurship is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC?

6. How much do you agree with the idea that the competence-based curriculum which added all the characteristics mentioned in questions will prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC?

On holistic language teaching/learning, the questions included:

1. How much do you agree with the idea that the holistic language teaching/learning which integrates of all the four skills that are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC?
2. How much do you agree with the idea that the holistic language teaching/learning which demands authentic learning environment and thus prepares for professions and the forthcoming AEC?
3. How much do you agree with the idea that the holistic language teaching/learning which makes learning natural by combining reading, writing, speaking and listening in a single activity and thus prepares for professions and the forthcoming AEC?
4. How much do you agree with the idea that the competence-based curriculum which included the holistic language teaching/learning will prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC?

### Data collection and data analysis

This study was triangulated. The data was collected during January – May 2012. The SWOT analysis was used for the qualitative data to draw the conclusion of the study while a descriptive technique (i.e. percentage) was used for analyzing the quantitative data from the questionnaire to draw the conclusion of the study as presented below.

### Results of the study

The results of the study were presented based on the research questions.

**Research question 1:** How do the key informants whose main areas of expertise were language education perceive competence-based learning?

The results of the SWOT analysis revealed that the expert key informants assured that the redesigned curriculum which direct towards competence-based learning-will help prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC successfully. Below are major points of findings which fall into four categories: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

### Strengths

The key informants pinpointed the following strengths of the curriculum.

*First, it provided a combination of contents, skills and attitudes needed for effective communication. Competence, by definition, requires the integration of knowledge or contents, skills and professional attitudes which the students can learn to apply in authentic workplace contexts. The redesigned competence-based curriculum which is based on the combination of contents, skills and attitudes essential for effective communication and performance is likely to help the students cope with all changes including the forthcoming AEC effectively.*

[Key informant 1]

*Second, it provided a preparation for increased competition. The changes definitely lead to competition. Effective communication skills which are based on contents, skills and attitudes prepare the students to develop themselves academically, professionally and personally in order to become a 'more complete person' when they leave the university.*

[Key informant 2]

*Third, it provided a response to internationalization. The students will have more opportunity to use English more and this will help them improve their English,*

*communicate with people from different cultures from other ASEAN country members and establish contacts with them successfully. If the students can establish the contacts, they achieve real success as real success in English learning which is achieved when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom.*

[Key informant 3]

*Fourth, it provided a shift from generalization to adaptive specialization. ESP, by definition, requires the specialization of the contents or knowledge and skills regarding to language and profession. Therefore, in learning and assessment processes, knowledge and skills of language knowledge/skills and professional knowledge/skills are integrated. Also, to the processes, generalization of language knowledge/skills and adaptive specialization are stimulated simultaneously.*

[Key informant 4]

*Lastly, it provided sustainable quality orientation. Since the world keeps changing rapidly, all fields of education including language that can cope with changes must be quality-oriented. The orientation provides a basis for a lifelong-learning attitude for students by integrating language development to other aspects of human development and keeping these components of development together helping the student to be proficient in the usage of that language.*

[Key informant 5]

### **Weaknesses**

However, the success of such learning has some obstacles or weaknesses relating to the teachers and the students.

*The teachers might lack the skill needed for the integration of four language skills. For various reasons, traditional English language teacher, in general, prefer the grammar-translation method to other practical methods (e.g., the direct method, the*

*audio-lingual method, communicative language learning, community language learning, task-based learning and so on) and are therefore concentrating on just one language skill solely. If they teach more than one skill, they tend to teach those skills separately. Therefore, their designed materials and activities usually focus on one specific skill (i.e. writing skill) and overlook others (i.e. listening, speaking and reading). In brief, these traditional teachers are more familiar with teaching one language skill and might lack the teaching skill which enables them to integrate all four language skills so their teaching will never be natural and true to the genuinely communicative situation.*

[Key informant 4]

Similar advice came from another key informant.

*The traditional teachers have been focusing on accuracy, knowledge about language, academic achievement, and cognitive aims so it is not easy for them to move to fluency, skill in using language, social and personal development, and affective aims. In addition, using integrative approach for the four skills requires traditional teachers to make more effort in choosing materials and designing activities than the traditional English teaching. Therefore, they must face difficulties and may fail to find the materials or design the activities appropriate and effective for teaching the integration of four language skills. With these traditional practices, the redesigned curriculum will never get to real success.*

[Key informant 3]

*Even though the teachers have changed their focus to integrative, there are many difficulties for them in an attempt to make the redesigned curriculum a real success. Heavy teaching loads, extra-curriculum activities, personal development, career progress, administrative responsibility, over 40 students in a class which should not exceed 25 students to make English language learning effective and successful, inadequately equipped classrooms and educa-*

*tional technology are some of the obstacles to the success.*

[Key informant 1]

*With the redesigned curriculum, the classroom teachers should know more about effective strategies for encompassing of four skills and the teaching process which integrates knowledge and skills, promoting the focus on realistic communication, motivating and encouraging passive students to learn the language and be more involved actively in language learning activities. This is a very demanding job for language teachers.*

[Key informant 2]

All key informants agreed that the students are the main cause of failure.

*The students today just learn English for university entrance examinations and this influences both the teaching and learning style which is not a true learning but a tutorial. With this style of learning, they do not aim at true learning and self-development, lack a sense of responsibility for their own learning and more importantly lack a sense of self-development. Eventually, they become passive learners, lose motivation and do not willing to get involved actively in classroom language learning activities and feel English lessons are too hard and unchallenging (or too challenging to overcome). Apart from the lack of self-motivation, the students seem too shy to speak English with classmates. Also, the context is an obstacle as English is not used outside the classroom in Thai context so the students lack of opportunity to use English in their daily lives. Due to this lack of practice, they cannot communicate naturally and fluently so they cannot cope with and overcome the interference from their native language particularly in pronunciation, syntax, and idiomatic usage. English finally becomes too challenging for average Thai students to use English for communication. The redesigned curriculum must prepare for these hindrances.*

[Key informants 1-5]

## Opportunities

Despite of those hindrances, the curriculum has promising features which fall in to two aspects: on competence base and on integration of four skills.

*On the competence base, the curriculum equips students with knowledge, skills and professional attitudes which they can learn to apply in authentic workplace contexts. Also, it contextualizes the experiences and realities of the learners by offering all these: opportunities for integrative language use, holistic communicative competence, competency orientation applied to its situational contexts, interactive methods in conflict resolution, responsive actions regarding to professional needs, social responsibility in entrepreneurship and, most important of all, and emerging transformation based on the transfer of dynamic competencies in real-world settings and authentic tasks that require knowledge-in-action.*

*On the integration of the four skills, the focus on realistic language use which integrates four skills can lead to the students' all-round development of communicative competence in English. Communicative competence requires the integration of the four language skills and an exposure to authentic language use in meaningful contexts. The integration therefore prepares for the use of language for changes.*

[Key informants 1-5]

## Threats

The the integration of the four skills has a threat as a result of change.

*Dealing with these is an uphill task. Even if it were possible to develop four skills effectively, this does not ensure adequate preparation for real international communication, in which language skills, communicative skills, and knowledge of contents are employed simultaneously in the variety of unpredictable changes and multicultural, political and socio-economic complexities. Failure is unavoidable.*

[Key informants 1-5]

The perceptions of expert key informants above revealed that the strengths

and opportunities of the redesigned curriculum outweigh the weaknesses and threats considerably in terms of contents and benefits to the students in preparation for AEC in 2015. This was also supported by the satisfaction of the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and entrepreneurs

on competence-based learning as revealed in the next research question

**Research question 2:** How do the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and entrepreneurs agree with the competence-based curriculum which integrates all four skills?

**Table 1** The perceptions of the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and entrepreneurs on competence-based learning

On competence-based learning How much do you agree with the idea that...?	Levels of Satisfaction				
	Very much	much	not sure	a little	little
holistic communicative competence is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC	81.25 (65)	12.50 (10)	6.25 (5)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
interdisciplinary problem- solving is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC	87.50 (70)	7.50 (6)	5.0 (4)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
interactive methods in conflict resolution are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC	78.75 (63)	10.00 (8)	11.25 (9)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
responsive actions regarding to professional needs are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC	75.00 (60)	17.50 (14)	7.50 (6)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
social responsibility in entrepreneurship is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC	40.00 (32)	53.75 (43)	6.25 (5)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
the competence-based curriculum which added all the characteristics mentioned in questions mentioned above will prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC	87.50 (70)	7.50 (6)	5.0 (4)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)

Total number of the respondents = 80

Table 1 showed that more than 70% of the respondents were satisfied much and very much with competence-based learning which was the main aspect of the curriculum and around 10% or less were not sure while none of them gave negative responses. In details, there were some interesting findings. First, they agreed that holistic communicative competence is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC, ranking from the most to the least as follows: very much (81.25 %, n = 65), much (12.50%, n = 10), and not sure

(6.25 %, n = 5) respectively. Second, they agreed that interdisciplinary problem-solving is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC as follows: very much(87.50%, n = 70), much (7.50%, n = 6), and not sure (5.0%, n = 4) respectively. Third, they agreed that interactive methods in conflict resolution are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC as follows: very much(78.75%, n = 63), much (10.00%, n = 8), and not sure (11.25%, n = 9) respectively. Fourth, they agreed that interactive

methods in conflict resolution are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC as follows: very much (78.75%, n = 63), much (10.00%, n = 8), and not sure (11.25%, n = 9) respectively. Fifth, they agreed that social responsibility in entrepreneurship is needed for professions and thus prepares for the forthcoming AEC as follows: very much (40.00%, n = 32), much (53.75%, n = 43), and not sure (6.25%, n = 5) respectively. Sixth and lastly, they agreed that the competence-based curriculum which added all the characteristics mentioned in questions mentioned above will prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC

as follows: very much (87.50%, n = 70), much (7.50%, n = 6), and not sure (5.0%, n = 4) respectively. This indicated that the respondents including the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and the entrepreneurs agreed that competence-based learning is effective for preparing the students for the forthcoming AEC.

In addition, onholistic language teaching/learning, the perceptions of the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and entrepreneurs yielded similar findings as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2** The perceptions of the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and entrepreneurs onholistic language teaching/learning

On holistic language teaching/learning How much do you agree with the idea that...?	Levels of Satisfaction				
	Very much	much	not sure	a little	little
the holistic language teaching/learning which integrates of all the four skills that are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC	87.50 (70)	12.50 (10)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
the holistic language teaching/learning which demands authentic learning environment and thus prepares for professions and the forthcoming AEC	90.00 (72)	10.00 (8)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
the holistic language teaching/learning which makes learning natural by combining reading, writing, speaking and listening in a single activity and thus prepares for professions and the forthcoming AEC	92.50 (74)	7.50 (6)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
the competence-based curriculum which included the holistic language teaching/learning will prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC	91.25 (73)	8.75 (7)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)

Total number of the respondents = 80

Table 2 showed that all 100% of the respondents were satisfied with holistic language teaching/learning. Approximately 90%(n = 70)went to very much and only 10%(n = 10) was for much whereas there were no negative responses at all. Specifically, the highest number of the respondents (92.50%, n = 74) agreed that

the holistic language teaching/learning which makes learning natural by combining reading, writing, speaking and listening in a single activity and thus prepares for professions and the forthcoming AEC. Relatively, 91.25 %(n =73) agreed that the competence-based curriculum which included the holistic language teaching/

learning will prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC and 90.00 % (n =72) agreed that the holistic language teaching/learning which demands authentic learning environment and thus prepares for professions and the forthcoming AEC. Lastly, 87.50% (n =70) agreed that the holistic language teaching/learning which integrates of all the four skills that are needed for professions and thus prepare for the forthcoming AEC. This indicated that the respondents including the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and the entrepreneurs were sure that holistic language teaching/learning is effective for preparing the students for the forthcoming AEC.

### Conclusion

Drawing upon the findings of the SWOT analysis and the questionnaire, it could be concluded that the redesigned ESP business-based curriculum which included competence and holistic language learning would be able to prepare for global and regional market changes as revealed in the following major findings. On the perceptions of expert key informants, the strengths and opportunities of the redesigned curriculum outweigh the weaknesses and threats considerably in terms of contents and benefits so it is effective for preparing the students for AEC in 2015. Similarly, the graduates and students of English for Business Communication and entrepreneurs agreed that competence-based learning and holistic language teaching/learning are highly possible to prepare the students for the forthcoming AEC successfully.

### Implication

The implication indicated that the ESP curriculum for changes should direct towards competency and the findings of this study will also help facilitate further understanding of curriculum design and implementation of ESP and competency-based curriculum in higher education.

### Suggestion for further inquiry

Future study should inquire the efficiency of this innovation.

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