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A Consideration of the Role of The Four Iddhipada and the Sutta in Teaching English in Thailand Today

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ABSTRACT:

This article discusses aspects of two 2,500-year-old eastern frameworks for learning, based on the teachings of the Buddha. They are the Four Iddhipada, a philosophy of principles and process in teaching and learning, and the Sutta, a Thai oral tradition that describes the habits of a scholar. The Four Iddhipada and the Sutta are either unknown or disregarded by foreign English language teachers in Thailand, and they have fallen into disuse with most modern Thai teachers of English. The two philosophies are compared with various

western language acquisition theories and teaching methodologies. The conclusion is that they are complementary and compatible with each other, and should be given more consideration by both Thai and native English speakers in the teaching of English in Thailand.

Introduction

The language teaching revolution of the last 100 years has produced numerous language acquisition theories and teaching methodologies. They have been promoted, been acclaimed by some, criticized by others, and subsequently been demoted in something akin to an ideological fashion parade. No single theory or methodology has been proved to be the right one. Communication Language Teaching (CLT) is currently in vogue and is actively promoted and taught by many universities and colleges as the preferred methodology, at least in Australia, where this writer studied. However, that is now being challenged, with Internet journal articles typically headlined: ‘Is communicative language teaching a thing of the past?’ (Beale, 2003).

One of the reasons for the transience in popularity and ephemeral nature of many theories or methodologies may be that there is indeed no ‘right one’. The circumstances and situations of individual and group language learners are very diverse, particularly for learners of English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL), which is the case with the majority of English language learners in Thailand.

Western psychologists, linguists and teachers have studied, debated and applied these numerous theories and methodologies, with varying degrees of success and failure. But they have largely ignored, or been ignorant of, two eastern philosophical frameworks for learning, based on 2,500-year-old teachings of the Buddha, that have stood the test of time. The first, *The Four Iddhipada*, is a philosophy of principles and process in teaching and learning. The second, flowing from *The Four Iddhipada*, is a Thai oral tradition, the *Sutta*, that describes the habits of a scholar.

This paper will discuss *The Four Iddhipada* and *Sutta* and the role they have played in Thai scholarship, teaching and learning. It will demonstrate clear compatibility between *The Four Iddhipada* and the *Sutta* and many western language-learning theories and methodologies.

This writer does not believe that western English language teachers in Thailand should wholeheartedly embrace and adopt *The Four Iddhipada* and the *Sutta* but will argue that a consciousness of them places many of the problems of teaching in Thailand into context. Orientation for newly-arrived teachers on these traditional methodologies, together with aspects of Thai history, culture and society, would allow for a more informed choice in the adoption and/or modification of teaching methodologies for the particular teaching/learning situation, because a clear synergy can be demonstrated between western teaching theories and methodologies and *The Four Iddhipada* and the *Sutta*. These alternative non-western approaches can be incorporated with western theories and

methodologies in the teaching of English in Thailand, because at base they are complementary and compatible.

Background

Thai education institutions, at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, have been criticized by both western and local educationalists for taking a traditional and conservative approach to the teaching of EFL. As Kirtikara (2002, p.2) says:

The curriculum emphasized grammar, readings and comprehension. Not much was offered on conversation and essay writing.

Many schools and universities are trying to modernize and adopt more contemporary and effective teaching methods. The South East Asian economic crises of recent years have led to many changes in education in Thailand. As education budgets have fluctuated, universities are becoming increasingly competitive, particularly the country's numerous private universities. As Sakolchai (1999, p.6) says of the situation in Thailand:

All universities need to be adapted, modified and changed or even revolutionized in various aspects for their survival in the next century.

There are esoteric challenges, particularly for the foreign teacher, in trying to effect change in a society where Buddhist teaching/learning philosophies demand respect. This writer is increasingly drawn to the belief that western criticism of traditional Asian teaching has more to do with perceptions of its 'sterile' methodology than the underlying philosophical principles that have always placed learning, education and scholarship in Asia on higher pedestals than in western societies. For example, it is the writer's observation that many foreign teachers in Thailand do not differentiate between 'rote' learning and 'repetitive' learning, and are dismissive of them. Biggs (1994), in what he calls the 'Asian paradox', clearly differentiates between the two; rote learning being mindless absorption of information, whereas repetitive learning can be a strategy for recall and perceptual understanding.

Kirtikara (2003) citing Hirunburana (2001) points to two key Buddhist theories in the development of what he calls 'language giftedness'. At the forefront of these are *The Four Iddhipada*, which describe valuable attributes that traditionally have enabled and enriched Thai learners. Any Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST) who wants to teach in Thailand would be advised to consider *The Four Iddhipada* as valid as any western language acquisition or teaching theory. At the very least, it should be acknowledged that these philosophical principals and processes have existed and been valued for thousands of years, proving more durable than many ephemeral western theories.

The Four Iddhipada are recorded in ancient Pali writings. This writer accessed them in English translation in the Bodhipakkhiya Dipana (The Manuals of Buddhism) (Sayadaw,

1999). The first of *The Four Iddhipada* is *Chanda*, will or aspiration, satisfaction and joy in learning. Second is *Virya*, the diligent energy, effort and exertion required. Third is *Citta*, attending wholeheartedly to the learning with active thoughtfulness. Fourth is *Vimamsa*, investigation, examination, reasoning and testing of the language being learned.

Iddhipada is a compound Pali word comprising ‘*Iddhi*’ and ‘*Pada*’. ‘*Iddhi*’ can be translated as completeness or perfection. ‘*Pada*’ translates as the ‘root’ or ‘basis’. *Chanda* is the concept that there is nothing within or without one’s personality that can obstruct the attainment of the goal. “If I do not attain this accomplishment in this life, I shall not rest content.” *Virya* is the energy and effort needed to achieve the goal against all odds, hardships and setbacks; denial of discouragement. “He is not discouraged even though it is said to him that he must put forth effort for many days, months and years.” *Citta* is extreme, strong and ardent attachment to the goal. “One attains satisfaction and tranquility only when one’s mind is absorbed in matters connected with the *Iddhi* (goal).”

Vimamsa is the conscious perception of the gaining of knowledge and wisdom. “It is knowledge that can clearly perceive the advantages and benefits of the *Iddhi*” (Sayadaw. 1999. p.10).

Similar to *The Four Iddhipada*, the oral traditions of the *Sutta* concern ‘the habits of a scholar’, and contain four components. Learning is acquired through listening and reading. Second, the scholar must think about his subject and attend to it wholeheartedly. The third step is to question what has been listened to or read until understanding is achieved. The

fourth step is to take note of the learning and start the questioning process all over again, always striving for a better answer.

Kirtikara (2003, p. 6) says of the *Sutta*: “It amplifies that there are other stimuli to learning, such as reading, listening, discussion and experiences. Inquiry or inquisitiveness is essential in learning ... Writing clarifies thinking as well as providing feedback through learning via other stimuli”.

He discusses the breakdown of The *Four Iddhipada* in modern Thai society, in part because of western influences on daily Thai life and economic development. He says *Chanda* has been lost as learning has become divorced from real life, increasingly exam-driven and abstract and formula based. *Virya* is in danger of extinction as Thais develop economically and become increasingly middle class. Thai parents no longer want their children to work and toil as hard as they did to achieve success, a sentiment that is often found in many upwardly mobile western families. *Citta* has to compete with increasingly attractive and available distractions such as television, computer games and the Internet. This writer has observed Thai students busily occupied at university-provided computers playing computer games rather than researching. Consequently, *Vimamsa* is absent when learning is not motivated. Kirtikara (2003, p.10) says:

It is observed that nowadays a classroom is intellectually quiet.

No intellectual exchanges take place. A monologue, a teacher being the sending end and students being the receiving

end ... the spirit of education reform under implementation must bring back *The Four Iddhipada* if learning and education in Thailand are to be uplifted and enlightened.

In terms of ‘bringing back’ *The Four Iddhipada* as Kirtikara advocates, it must be questioned whether, with the cultural shifts of the past few decades and the dominance of western teaching methodologies in Thailand, that is now possible. Klausner (1998, p.4) addresses this conundrum:

Today when one refers to Eastern or Thai traditional values, it must be appreciated that such values no longer represent social reality. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on us ... to understand traditional patterns as well as the changes and refinements in the cultural mosaic. In spite of the rapid change, continuity often holds sway.

In an interview with this writer, the Director of The Language Institute at Bangkok’s Dhurakijpundit University, Dr Peansiri Vongvipanond, gave further insight into the challenges that *The Four Iddhipada* are under in contemporary Thai teaching and learning. Vongvipanond has been a teacher for nearly 40 years and was ‘fortunate enough’ to be raised and educated in schools that had resisted change and where *The Four Iddhipada* were daily diet as part of the curriculum.

Forty years ago, when Thailand launched its first national social economic development plan, it opened itself to western ideas, particularly in education. Thailand set itself on development, material rather than spiritual. Because of this historical development teachers were sent overseas to be trained in ‘so-called normal schools’, mainly in the United States, and were heavily influenced in their way of thinking (Vongvipanond, 2003).

She says:

It was from this time on that reference to the Lord Buddha’s teaching seemed to be out-dated. For in America, all denominations, all religious groups have to be equally treated, so all the traditional teachings started to be removed from the Thai curriculum.

But if it is not too late, surely a good start would be for Thai teachers to revisit *The Four Iddhipada* and to seriously question how they can be reinvigorated, and for foreign teachers to at least acquaint themselves with these philosophies. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, traditional eastern philosophies and modern western methodologies are not mutually exclusive; they can be demonstrated to be inclusive. Many of the underlying philosophies, theories and methodologies of both could be a powerful symbiotic tonic in Thai education, but only if Thai and foreign teachers alike work together to meet the challenges and find the mix or the fit that will work in Thailand’s particular and complex situations. Similarly, Adamson (2003), in his investigation of how Theravada Buddhism influences what occurs in the Thai English language classroom, emphasizes the

importance of teacher awareness of the religious and social concepts of the environment in which they are teaching.

Western theories and The Four Iddhipada

Thais are all too familiar with 'sanuk', which underpins much of what they do and think. It is most easily translated into English as 'having a sense of fun'. If there is not an element of fun in work, an activity or an endeavour, Thais lack motivation and are likely to 'switch off', and nowhere is this more evident than in the English teaching classroom. As Adamson (2003, p.8) says: "Those who have integrated sanuk into their activities may then be viewed as having 'intrinsic' motivation".

In several ways Krashen and *The Four Iddhipada* come from the same base, particularly when it comes to 'fun' and motivation. Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis that input must be experienced under conditions which lower anxiety and raise the motivation and self-image of the learner (Schultz, 2002 & Mason, 2003) equates to *The Four Iddhipada's* emphasis on the need for 'joy in learning' and the 'diligent energy and effort' required for success.

At least at tertiary level, the goal of English teaching in Thailand often includes the aim of communicating in social settings both inside and outside university. This goes to the core of communicative competence as originally developed by Hymes (Hymes, 1978) and further developed in the 1980s by Canale and Swain (Canale and Swain, 1980). The four

components of communicative competence can be summarized as grammatical competence, sociocultural competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. By definition, communicative competence, particularly sociocultural competence and discourse competence, almost demand a CLT-type approach. They cannot be learned effectively in a teacher-fronted classroom. They demand teacher-student interaction, learner-centered processes, group and pair work and willingness by both the teacher and learners to experiment.

The development of such a collaborative classroom fits with the concepts of *The Four Iddhipada*. Exploring a 'new vision' of learning, Tinzmann et al (1990, pp. 1-3) suggest four characteristics of successful learners: knowledgeable, self-determined, strategic and empathetic thinking. Though not an exact fit, these are not dissimilar to the *Chanda* (determination), *Virya* (effort) *Citta* (thoughtfulness) and *Vimamsa* (investigation and self-examination) of *The Four Iddhipada*. The challenge is to introduce students to the concepts of shared knowledge among teachers and students; shared authority between teachers and students; the role of the teacher as mediator; and the benefits of having heterogeneous groups of students. The concept of shared authority may prove particularly worrisome to some Thai students in a society that holds teachers in high respect and accords them the formal title *ajarn*.

The Four Iddhipada lends itself to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Hanley (1994) discusses nine characteristics of the constructivist teacher, including being a resource for learners; encouraging students to challenge preconceptions; allowing the

students to drive the lesson and fostering student autonomy; using cognitive terminology in framing questions; linking ‘knowing’ and ‘finding out’; and insisting on clear expressions from the students. Hanley (1994, pp. 2-3) citing Brooks and Brooks (1993) says: “When students can communicate their understanding, then they have truly learned”.

More interesting is comparing the responsibilities that both the constructivist approach and *The Four Iddhipada* put on learners. Compare *Chanda*, *Virya*, *Citta* and *Vimamsa* with the onus placed on learners in a constructivist approach. Constructivism requires students to set their own goals; mediate and control their learning; seek knowledge independently; discuss, analyze and evaluate information independently and as group members, become ‘apprentices’; and self-evaluation. If we strip *The Four Iddhipada* of the flowery language (by English standards), there is very little difference in the demands they make of students. Again, the concept of shared authority may prove particularly worrisome to some Thai students and convincing them that teachers are willing to share authority and hand-over control might be difficult in practice.

Back to the Future

As previously discussed, western influences contributed to the decline of the *The Four Iddhipada* and the *Sutta* in Thai educational curricula some forty years ago and they are now unfamiliar to many Thai teachers and virtually unknown to most foreign teachers working in Thailand. Certainly, there are teachers, like Vongvipanond, who were educated in the last bastions of the traditional curriculum, and who still try to correctly place the old

methods alongside modern western methodologies. But teaching requires learning. If students are unfamiliar with the traditional methods, the teacher is likely to put in a great deal of effort for disappointing results.

So how realistic is Kirtikara's call for *The Four Iddhipada* to be reinstated in the curricula? The answer is probably that it is unrealistic to seek or to expect full restoration. Too much time has passed and western theories and methodologies are ingrained. It would require the highest level executive decision to reinstate *The Four Iddhipada* to Thai curricula, and it would take a generation to produce university students imbued with the old values.

But that is not to argue that a 2,500-year-old philosophy, so long an integral part of Thai culture, should be allowed to completely wither and be discarded from Thai educational curricula as a dusty and irrelevant archive. *The Four Iddhipada* and the *Sutta* are alive and taught in the monkhood in Thailand. As long as there remains a consciousness of the traditional methods, albeit among a decreasing number of Thais, there is hope that perhaps renewed interest can be promoted and *The Four Iddhipada* and the *Sutta* can be placed in context alongside western teaching/learning methodologies.

Increased awareness is perhaps the first step. Thai universities expend much effort and expense in the development of their Thai teachers, both in on-campus seminars and workshops and scholarships for further studies. *The Four Iddhipada* could be introduced into teacher-development programs, which at the least would raise consciousness of them among the younger breed of Thai teachers.

Foreign teachers should be acquainted with *The Four Iddhipada*, if for no other reason than to dispel notions among some that they have all the answers. Foreign teachers are recruited and brought to Thailand at great expense, but it is this writer's observation that little 'cultural orientation' is offered. The presumption seems to be that having arrived here, they are fully qualified to teach in an environment which many of them have never stepped foot in before. Thai educational authorities and academics could be more assertive. Why not make it part of the contract that foreign teachers undergo orientation courses on Thai history, culture and society, including *The Four Iddhipada*.

There are many other things that could be considered by meetings of like-minded people. If this paper has added to and encouraged the debate, it has served its purpose.

Conclusion

English language teaching has undergone a revolution over the past hundred years, with the postulation of many theories and methodologies. No single theory has been proved to be the 'right one'. While this has been going on, two eastern philosophies on teaching and learning have remained largely unknown outside of Thailand, and internally have gone into decline.

There are clear compatibilities between *The Four Iddhipada* and the *Sutta* and western teaching and learning theories and methodologies. Before it is irreversibly too late, this

paper argues for an increased consciousness among both Thai and foreign teachers of the context and values of these traditional methods.

Perhaps it is worthwhile for teachers, Thai and foreign alike, to reflect on the following. The east is looking to the west to assist with English language teaching. The emphasis here is on 'assist'. Thai teachers should not abrogate their own special knowledge and skills in front of foreign teachers. And the west should look to the east before assuming it has all the answers. Despite declarations to the contrary, cultural imperialism is unfortunately still alive and well in many western attitudes to the east. It is time for west to meet east and east to meet west on equal terms. Such an approach could bring surprising results to both.

Kipling's famous first line from The Ballard of East and West, "Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet" is often dismembered from the rest of the stanza when quoted by apologists of western colonialism in the past. It would be well to remember that Kipling's full first verse was:

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of
the earth!

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