

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Action-based language empowerment in Thai

Don W. Maybin

Shonan Institute of Technology

Paul G. Batten

Kagawa University

Reference data:

Maybin, D.W., & Batten, P.G. (2008). Action-based language empowerment in Thai. In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This article explains the principles of an intensive language-training program for Thai based on an experimental curriculum and pedagogy referred to as *action-based language empowerment* or *ABLE*. The general principles of the *ABLE* methodology are outlined, followed by comments on the running of the 11-hour course and observations about participants' actual onsite performance in Thailand.

本論はタイ語集中プログラムの教育方法と実践例を論じる。参加者は、現地に行く前に11時間の集中講座を受けている。その後、現地にて母語話者と一緒に多様な場面で目的語での実際的な能力を評価した。参加者は、様々な観点によって、筆者により評価されている。本論で述べられているプログラムの目標は、短時間で、今迄まったく接触なかった言葉を習得する教育方法を説明するものである。

Thai-ABLE

In February and March of 2007, a group of eight individuals, including four 3rd-year undergraduate students, one graduate student and one instructor in Computer Sciences, and one German graduate student in Material Sciences, all at Shonan Institute of Technology (SIT), as well as one Bulgarian graduate student in Comparative Linguistics at Kyoto University attempted to learn Thai using an experimental curriculum and pedagogy whose prime aim is to provide learners with basic communication skills centered on selected functional contexts. Training included compensatory strategies to enable participants to deal with situations beyond their initial grasp ($i + x$)ⁱ, which would ideally encourage learner

autonomy and result in successful language acquisition. This teaching approach has been developed for over 30 years by one of the authors, Don Maybin, using 11 languages with approximately 300 learners of varying ages and backgrounds. Given that the pedagogy requires an active stance on the part of learners in which they respond to language instruction with specific actions or responses, and that learner performance is examined *in situ*, the curriculum and pedagogy are referred to as *action-based language empowerment*, or *ABLE*¹ for short.

The Thai-ABLE program described in this report was held in two phases over 2 weeks. The first phase was comprised of 11 hours of language training conducted in the first week in Japan with the above eight participants, while the second phase was carried out onsite in Thailand with six of the participants as they attempted to apply the language they had learned to carry out designated tasks, initially in pairs in Bangkok and then individually in the provincial city of Ubon Ratchathani where they interacted with students from Rajabhat Ubon Ratchathani University.

Curriculum design

The format of an *ABLE* course is unique. Compared to a standard curriculum with one theme presented *vertically* in each lesson, in an *ABLE* course each thematic unit is divided into six levels resulting in six teaching modules (Diagram 1). When the material for one module has been covered, learners move *horizontally* to the module for the next thematic area. Once all modules at one level have been covered, learners progress to the next level where material presented at the previous level is recycled and expanded. Modules vary

in length based on the level and thematic area (e.g., given the volume of food lexis, modules for the *Ordering in a restaurant* functional area can vary from approximately 5 to 12 minutes). The end result is a spiraling format (Diagram 2), which develops learner ability to remember key language and retrieve it for application onsite when completing assigned tasks in the target language.

There are elements characteristic of an *ABLE* course which are normally not found in more standard approaches. These include:

- small groups of 4 to 10 participants are taught, since larger groups have trouble viewing the visual materials integral to the course, while one-on-one tutorials tend to put too much pressure on the individual;
- the use of absolute beginner adult learners who have no previous knowledge of the target language (vs. adult learners of English in Japan);
- a total study time of 10-12 hours structured in 60-90 minute sessions over approximately 10 days (as opposed to one 90-minute lesson per week or an intensive course with several hours in a day);
- fast-paced lessons with a frequent change of topic;
- immediacy in terms of material and applicability, particularly since participants have selected the functions to be covered in a pre-course survey;
- an awareness from the outset that the target language must be applied onsite immediately upon completion of the course;

- sole use of the target language for classroom instruction;
- where the script is not based on the Roman alphabet, limited, if any, use of the target language script due to time restrictions;
- no overt explanation of the structure of the language (i.e., grammar);
- the ultimate demand for ability to interact in the target language through the use of specific communication strategy models with key phrases required to carry out the strategies presented as *formulaic language*;
- scheduled repetition, including words and key phrases, which is intrinsic to the spiraling nature of the curriculum with material from the previous level automatically recycled, then expanded in activities which also review the communication strategies.

Participants and attitudes

There were eight male participants initially enrolled for the Thai-ABLE course. Although all completed the course as described above, one of the 3rd-year undergraduate students and the German graduate student were unfortunately unable to accompany the group to Thailand due to unforeseen circumstances. Also, one of the authors, Paul Batten, did not attend the training; however, he did join the group for the overseas portion of the program to observe onsite application of the target language (see below). The instructor was a young male undergraduate² from Bangkok studying physics at Tokyo University (i.e., not a language teaching

professional). Apart from his willingness to participate in the program, he was selected for his gender as all the participants were men and, given there is a marked difference in language use between men and women in Thai, an appropriate speech model was required.

One week prior to commencing the course, the instructor was provided with approximately one hour of training in the teaching methodology using French, a language he was unfamiliar with, as the target language. Prior to each class, he also reviewed the activities and materials with one of the authors, Don Maybin, which the latter had prepared in advance.

Before commencing the course, two surveys were administered, one to determine which functional areas the participants wished to study (e.g., ordering in a restaurant, using public transportation), the other to clarify motivational sources for taking the course, as well as to identify each person's sense of self-efficacy, or how he perceived his ability to learn another language. The majority felt visiting Thailand would be an enjoyable experience, but clearly believed they would be unable to communicate in the target language. In general, they expressed a disinterest in learning another language and doubted they would want to continue studying Thai once the program was completed. Apart from traveling with friends, there seemed to be little, if any, motivation to learn the language. During the course, as lessons progressed the general feeling evolved from one of pessimistic amusement in the first class ("This is fun, but I can't remember a thing") to a sense of relief with recognition of recycled words and terms from Lesson 2, to confidence in a developing ability to understand, but still doubt as

to whether they could communicate with native speakers onsite. Boarding the train to Narita Airport, there was a palpable sense of excitement mixed with apprehension.

Onsite observations

As mentioned above, upon arrival in Bangkok the group was joined by Paul Batten. Having studied Thai 17 years earlier using the *ABLE* approach, he was keen to identify how the approach had evolved through direct observation of the participants' onsite performance. The following impressions are based on his observations.

- Six was a good number of participants to travel. For such an intense course as that of *ABLE*, a smaller group is ideal to foster a sense of community with encouragement, as well as friendly rivalry.
- Finishing the classes in Japan at noon and then arriving in Bangkok at (mid)night was good timing. The learners were ready to go and landed running, so to speak. They seemed shocked, yet pleasantly surprised to be in the country where people spoke the language they had been studying. To be on your first trip overseas, as was the case for the three undergraduates, and to find oneself asking prices in Bangkok's Chinatown at 1:00 a. m. in a language you had imagined you would never be able to speak was an exciting start to the trip.
- Learners had a good working vocabulary in areas that they were to be tested, such as food items for ordering in restaurants.
- One component of each *ABLE* course is regional geography, including major centers within the country, as well as neighboring countries and the nations of the participants, in this case, Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, Japan and New Zealand. Thais were impressed when these nonnatives could recognize and produce local town names and areas, and this had a very high face value with listeners.
- One of the main problems for any learner in a new language is the inability to catch what native speakers say. The *ABLE* curriculum also includes training in communication strategy models with key phrases introduced as formulaic expressions. When faced with specific hurdles, such as others speaking too quickly or not having core words to complete a task, learners were able to apply communication strategies effectively. In a variety of situations, they controlled for speed and repetition and acquired new vocabulary items by eliciting them in the target language from native speakers.
- The learners were able to navigate their way around the overwhelming metropolis that is Bangkok on their first day, completing a series of assigned tasks. These included finding their way to the Kiwi Café, a small establishment located in a backstreet, where they then purchased their tickets for the overnight train to Ubon Ratchathani from an agent working from a small desk in the corner who spoke only Thai with them. All pairs successfully completed this daunting task.

- It was a logical transition to travel from urban Japan to Bangkok, then go on the 12-hour night train to the provincial capital of Ubon Ratchathani in the northeastern province of Isaan. Several of the participants commented that Bangkok was a lot like Tokyo where they live. On the other hand, Ubon was a totally new and unfamiliar environment. Also, while on the train participants had further opportunities to consolidate their Thai and develop confidence as they interacted with railway staff.
- In Ubon, the learners were exposed to Isaan dialect, often learning useful phrases from the local students. Given the excited response, it was assumed they considered using the local dialect an advantage and, hopefully, have developed a more positive attitude towards the spectrum of language present in dialects globally, including Japanese, where a regional accent can sometimes be viewed as amusing or even negatively.
- The ability of the participants to use what they had learned was aided immensely by the fact that they often worked on tasks together, sometimes with others in their group, other times with the Thai students in Ubon, as indeed L2 language use is in real life.
- As some of the Thai students were studying Japanese, as well as English, there was a palette of languages to work with and the pressure to perform in one language exclusively was less than it would have been in a monolingual context. This seemed to have the effect of relaxing both our learners and the Thai students, and actually facilitated language acquisition between the two groups.
- In Ubon Ratchathani, the participants were divided into three groups and started off their visit with a tour of the campus given by the Ubon students. This formal activity on the first day allowed the groups to get to know each other on fairly familiar territory, a university campus, before undertaking less formal activities. There was developing familiarity and all the learners left Ubon wanting to learn more of the exciting new language(s) that they had encountered and been using.
- Participants expressed a great deal of apprehension before the two onsite tests, which were set up by one of the authors, Don Maybin, based on his previous experiences with past programs in Thai. The first test was conducted in pairs the day of arrival in Bangkok (see 6th item above), and the second test was conducted “solo” in Ubon with a local student “chaperone/evaluator” whose role was to observe the learner’s language performance, but not to interfere. After completing the latter test, both the learners and their Thai partners filled in a multi-choice task-by-task evaluation sheet. This made it possible to check whether the learners’ confidence and actual performance (or lack of it) was matched by the results. Almost everyone doubted his ability to complete the tasks, which included asking directions, purchasing local snacks, asking how to say prayers at a temple, and taking *somng theeo* (jeepney-style “taxis”) to each venue. Still, upon completion of the onsite tests, learners generally rated themselves highly and considered that they had been successful in fulfilling their tasks. Also, there was a general consistency

between the learners' perceptions of their language performance and their ratings by the evaluators. While learners had been somewhat negative about the testing and their abilities beforehand, afterwards there was an almost nonchalant attitude toward having been successful. The testing was an integral part of establishing students' awareness of their abilities in Thai.

Many of the SIT learners were initially more interested in a language program to one of the more usual candidates, such as Australia or Canada, to study English. It would seem there is limited interest in learning Asian languages on the part of many Japanese university students. What proved truly impressive on this trip was that, by the time of their return, all the learners had become *aficionados* of Thailand and they *wanted* to learn more Thai. When one thinks of global understanding and Japan's place in the world, this is a wonderful development. The learners were helped immensely by the fact that they could interact in the local language. This enhanced their communication with people beyond the usual tourist/customer – vender/clerk framework. The change on locals' faces when foreigners attempted to communicate with them in Thai was readily apparent and positive.

Conclusions

Perhaps the greatest success of the Thai-*ABLE* course was the obvious change in how each participant perceived his ability to learn another language. Based on data obtained from questionnaires administered at the end of the program,

there was a marked sense of improved self-efficacy. Not only did all participants wish to continue studying Thai using the *ABLE* approach, but several were keen to use any means to improve their ability in Thai, including two who purchased *Teach Yourself Thai* books and software in Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport as they were leaving the country.

Another noteworthy feature was the fact that all felt they would like to study another language in the future using *ABLE*, a major development given the comments on their pre-course questionnaires. As Paul commented in his own evaluation, "To get a group of 'geeky' (in the sense of 'science/computer major') students enthused and confident about their skills in their third language and this keen to use them, is, in my opinion, one of the major strengths of the course that I observed. This is a great accomplishment for non-language major students (and indeed, even with language majors)." Clearly the confidence learners developed onsite using the target language was channeled into motivation and their perception of themselves as capable language learners. Furthermore, their awareness of themselves as speakers of English has also been piqued and will hopefully enhance their confidence in that language as well.

In spite of the glowing tenor of the above report, the *ABLE* curriculum and pedagogical approach has room for a great deal of improvement. Hurdles to be overcome with each course include not only scheduling headaches, travel costs and the logistical nightmare of moving people about the globe, but also ethical concerns, for example, individuals being "forced" to join a program by a family member or friend who has decided to participate. Although such

reluctant learners usually come around, the entire group can be effected by their negative influence. Also, the active nature of the training and onsite testing needs to be modified to better allow for potential participants who are physically-challenged.

Finally, given the enthusiasm with which participants are recruited, the creation of unrealistic course expectations is also an ongoing concern. Participants in an ABLE course cannot make lofty speeches, or even comprehend a movie in the language they have studied. They can, however, interact comfortably with locals in the target language and are equipped with “tools” in the form of communication strategies with which to further develop their linguistic ability outside of a classroom on their own in *any* encounter where the target language is being used to communicate. Furthermore, the end result of an *ABLE* course seems to be an advantageous *mindset* based on comfort using the target language for further interaction, as well as towards learning other languages.

To close, although the *ABLE* curriculum and pedagogy may seem at first to have a very limited scope, upon closer examination the research carried out to date has implications for a variety of language training contexts as varied as the teaching of children (the modular design with frequent changes of topic and fast-paced teaching approach would seem well-suited to younger learners) to the study of endangered languages (given the limited number of hours required to become functional, individuals may be more willing to undertake the study of a less mainstream language). In spite of limitations, the fact is *ABLE* training *is* possible and gives learners empowerment in a target

language several orders of magnitude faster than by “standard” teaching approaches. More careful investigation of the approaches and procedures specific to *ABLE* is warranted³ to determine whether certain principles can be adapted to a wider range of classroom contexts.

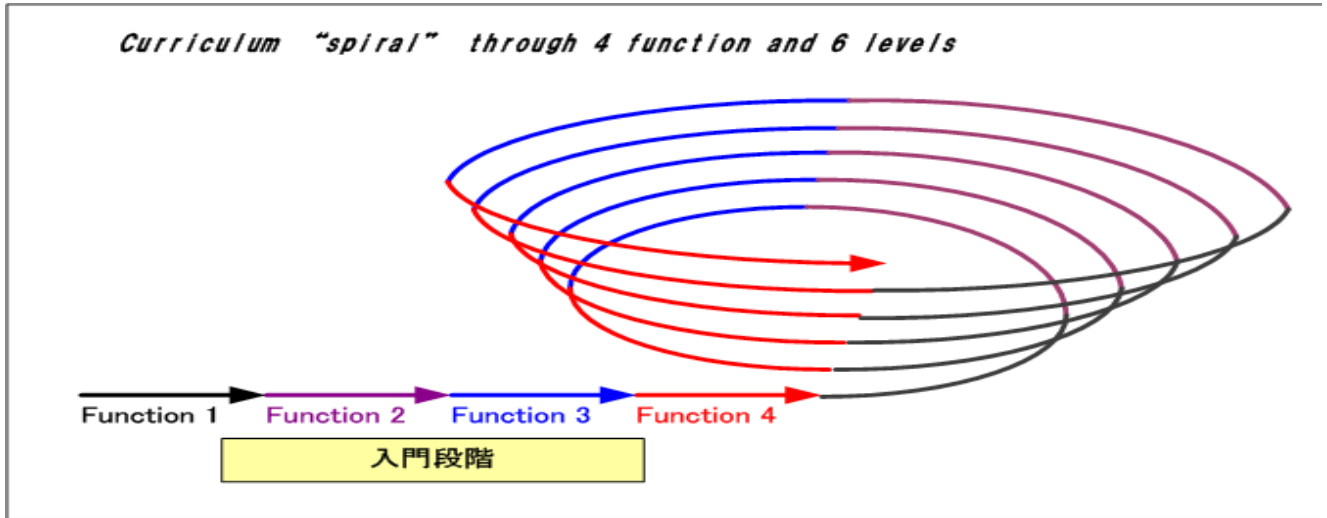
Don Maybin teaches at Shonan Institute of Technology. A featured speaker at JALT’s 2006 National Conference, he is coauthor of *The Active Learner*, a text for teaching communication strategies. <donmaybin@hotmail.com>

Paul Batten teaches at the Education Faculty, Kagawa University. He is interested in learners’ compensatory communicative strategies. <pbatten@ed.kagawa-u.ac.jp>

Diagram 1: "Horizontal" format of an ABE curriculum

Function 1: Introductions	Function 2: Hotel	Function 3: Directions	Function 4: Shopping	Function 5: Restaurant	Function 6: Public Transit	
Module 6	Module 6	Module 6	Module 6	Module 6	Module 6	
Module 5	Module 5	Module 5	Module 5	Module 5	Module 5	▶ Level 6
Module 4	Module 4	Module 4	Module 4	Module 4	Module 4	▶ Level 5
Module 3	Module 3	Module 3	Module 3	Module 3	Module 3	▶ Level 4
Module 2	Module 2	Module 2	Module 2	Module 2	Module 2	▶ Level 3
Module 1	Module 1	Module 1	Module 1	Module 1	Module 1	▶ Level 2

Diagram 2: Curriculum "spiral" through 4 functions and 6 levels



(Endnotes)

1. In this context, “ $i + x$ ” indicates any language input at a variety of levels that the learner may encounter and have to deal with when using a target language (cf. Krashen’s Input Hypothesis of “ $i + 1$ ” which indicates language one stage above the learner’s current level; Krashen, S. 1985. *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman).
2. The details given in this brief summary are based upon a presentation given by Don Maybin and Paul Batten on November 25 for the Other Language Educators (OLE) SIG at JALT’s 2007 national conference. This is the first time *ABLE* has been referred to in an educational work. A detailed description of the curriculum and teaching approach is being prepared for future publication.
3. The Thai instructor for this course describes his teaching experience in some detail on his blog, which can be viewed at <mynameistoey.spaces.live.com>; 2007年3月(March, 2007) entry.
4. Subsequently, an *ABLE* course was conducted from February 29 to March 16, 2008 using Turkish as the target language with participants from several countries who were tested on the streets of Istanbul.