English Program for High Ability Students

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As we move further into the 21st century, we are faced with rapid change in social, economic and scientific aspects of life. The advance of technology alone has had a tremendous impact on the changes in our global world. With these changes, English has become increasingly important as it is used in international trade as well as on the internet & websites. Because of this, Thailand has no choice but to upgrade its English education curriculum to ensure that it can prepare its citizens to meet the challenges of the competitive world.

One of the efforts related to English language development in Thailand is how to teach English to high ability upper-secondary school students.

Why do we need a special program for students with high ability in English?
High ability students have different learning styles from ordinary students. First, they have extremely high motivation. When they learn about something, they dive very deep into the content. They never give up until they have fulfilled their quest for knowledge. Second, they like to be challenged, otherwise, they easily loose interest. These characteristics are far different from those of ordinary students.

Most Thai schools especially in the upper-country still cannot successfully manage English language teaching and learning for all students due to several reasons. Therefore, many Thai students have low proficiency in English. This could be demonstrated through the results of the National English Test. Not that their English skills are poor, they also have negative attitudes towards learning English. It is therefore, counterproductive to put the high ability students in the same class as the ordinary ones. Moreover, students with high ability in English have better critical thinking, managing skills and possess higher creativity. Therefore, if these abilities have been developed in parallel with English, students will have more potential. On the other hand, these students can be egocentric and self-centered if not developed efficiently.

Because of this reason, a pilot research project to manage an English program for high ability upper-secondary school students in Northern Thailand conducted by Chiang Mai University through the initiative and financial support from the Office of the National Education Council has been set up.

What are the objectives of the research project?
The objectives of the research project are to

1.   develop a program to teach English to high ability upper-secondary school students in the north of Thailand,.
2.   evaluate the success of the program,
3.   present a guideline to manage an effective English program for high ability upper-secondary school students.

This paper will report only the process in program management and the program evaluation due to the limitation of time.

Program management process includes a selection of schools and students; curriculum planning; teaching and learning methods and evaluation procedures.

Let's start with **The School Selection Process**. This process started in January 2004. Administrators and teachers of large schools with upper-secondary education were invited to a seminar and workshop on high ability students. Application forms to join the program together with the checklist to evaluate the school's suitability to be in the program had been distributed. Eleven schools had shown interest by sending back the application forms. Another meeting was conducted with administrators of these schools to foster further understanding. Later, three schools withdrew and the project started with eight schools. After a semester of teaching and learning, one other school withdrew from the program. Therefore, The project continued with seven schools until the end of the program which lasted two educational years. (4 semesters)

Next, let's look at **The Students' Selection Process** which involved many steps, more than just students' grade point average and IQ scores. Selection started with the list of the top 20% of students' English grades for the past three semesters. Schools could add names of students who exhibited signs of disruptive behavior pointing out that they may have been simply bored and unchallenged in class. Then, willingness to join the program of students and parents were recorded and these students had been evaluated through language aptitude checklist, language intelligence test and a English proficiency test. 139 students were selected by the researchers. However, along the two years of the program, there were some students added and dropped and at the end of the program, there were 104 students left.

Due to the small number of students willingly applied to the program, except from one school, most of students had to be selected so that the schools would have enough students to join the pilot project eventhough they were not qualified enough.

Now, let's look at **The Curriculum Planning Process**. Two syllabi used in teaching and learning were chosen by researchers and teachers: They were acceleration and enrichment syllabi Acceleration syllabus covered the national benchmarks designed for 3 years of English at the upper-secondary level but it was accelerated into two years. It was assigned as core courses. It also aimed to develop knowledge, understanding, analysis and synthesis level of thinking. It consisted of 17 learning packages as follows:

Acceleration Syllabus	
Grammar	**Listening-Speaking**
- Tenses	- Conversation
- Preposition	**Listening**
- Connectors	- Listening Strategies
- Clauses	**Speaking**
- Phrasal Verb	- Oral Presentation Technique
- Reported speech	- Public Speaking
- Sentence Construction	**Writing**
Vocabulary	- E-Pal
- Vocab Notebook	- Journal Writing
Reading	- Paragraph Writing
- Reading Strategies	

- Critical Reading
- Poetry Reading

The enrichment syllabus focused on analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels of thinking. It also stressed on creating language products. There were 11 packages as follows:

Enrichment Syllabus

Read and take notes (graphic organizers)
Play Reading
Create Self-Access Reading Materials
Graded Reader
Maze
Diary Writing
Essay
Translation Project
I-EARN Project
Project Work
Play Performance

These 11 packages were also taught in two years and were assigned as elective courses.

The two syllabi were aimed to develop students' cognitive knowledge in English through the use of different media especially technological media. It also incorporated moral and social skills. Leadership and teamwork were also encouraged throughout the syllabi.

The last process to be discussed were **Teaching and Learning Methods**. It was agreed that teachers from every school would use the same learning packages accompanied with teaching guidelines, evaluating both cognitive and metcognitive development the same way and recording the results of learning similarly. However, the numbers of teaching and learning hours were not the same due to the school schedule. Teaching was done in a special class separated from ordinary students.

Teaching and learning were based on a learner-centered-approach. Developing multiple intelligence was included in the learning procedures. Students had to practice learning by doing activities. Evaluation was done on the learning process as well as on the quality of works produced and through examination.

Program evaluation was done through several forms of questionnaires distributed to find out the satisfaction of people involved in the program which included 104 students, 15 teachers, administrators and parents during and at the end of the program. It was also done through a General English Proficiency Test and English Specific Skills Tests before and after the program. Achievement scores and students' works which have been well recognized were also considered.

The results of the program evaluation are shown in 5 aspects of satisfaction as follows.

1.   **Overall Satisfaction**

Students, teachers, parents and administrators were proud to be involved in the program and saw the importance of such a program. This is because teachers and students had the chance to develop themselves to their full potential. They had been recognized by their peers and had brought fame to their schools. Students were satisfied with the acceleration of three years of English in the upper-secondary education into two years. They also were pleased that they can use English to upgrade their studies in other courses. However, they were moderately satisfied with the support from their schools especially in learning and teaching facilities and in providing time scheduled for learning and teaching.

2.   Satisfaction in Curriculum

Students and teachers were satisfied with the curriculum because students have developed their English proficiency and other life skills. Out of 26 teaching and learning packages in acceleration and enrichment syllabi, students were very satisfied that 22 packages had helped them to develop English proficiency. The four less satisfied were conversation and listening packages. This is because these were no lesson plans written for these two packages.
Researchers advised teachers to use commercial conversation books. These commercial books do not have detailed lesson plans and even if they do, it is written in English. As for the listening package, researchers recommended teachers to use an existing listening package which was designed for students to learn in the self-access center. Therefore, there was no lesson plan. This showed that lesson plans are very necessary for teachers. Another two unsatisfied packages were paragraph writing and poetry reading. For paragraph writing, students felt that there was not enough practice and for poetry reading, it might be because most of these students were science program students so they did not see any value in learning poetry.

Out of these 26 learning packages, students liked every package except sentence construction, paragraph writing and project work even though they saw their merits. This is because they had to produce a lot of academic written   works in these packages.

Out of 24 lesson plans, teachers stated that there was only one plan that was not easy to follow; that is, lesson plan for I-Earn Project. This is because this teaching package was involved with the use of I.T. technology and it required students from other schools to work together on the project. This made it difficult for teachers to manage.

3.   Satisfaction of on Teaching and Learning

Both teachers and students strongly agreed that the methods of teaching and learning both in class and outside of class were suitable because students could improve all four skills and increase their vocabularies. There were varieties of activities with the right level of difficulty relating to students' interests and real life. Teaching techniques allowed students to facilitate their own learning, developed higher thinking skills and team work. However, there should be more time allocated to work on these activities. Students also had problems working in groups because of the availability of time. They all agreed that students in this program received more knowledge than students in the ordinary program.

4.   Satisfaction on the Development of Students' English Ability.

All parties were highly satisfied with the students' development of English abilities. This satisfaction was well supported by several factors. First, by the result of Oxford Placement Test. Before joining the program students had an average scores of 28.99 which is considered at the level of lower intermediate. After two years in the program, their average scores were at 45.99 which is placed at the high scale of upper intermediate level. When considered

specific skills, another test showed the improvement in grammar, vocabulary and writing. However, their speed and critical reading needed to be more developed. This may be because there was no speed reading practice in the curriculum. With respect to critical reading, Thai students lack this skill even in Thai language. Therefore, more should be done on these skills. Unfortunately, there was no evaluation done to measure students' speaking skill especially in oral presentation which students had shown great improvement.

Another proof is from the average achievement scores of 3.80 in both syllabi. This shows that students had done very well throughout the program. However, it is still unfair to these students because had they been in the ordinary English program, they would definitely received an average grade 4.

When looking at the higher numbers of students who won scholarship to study overseas or won public speaking competitions, vocabulary competitions as compared to the previous years, it shows that students in this program have done very well.

Considering their language products such as Maze, play writing, play performance etc, it shows that these students possessed high abilities in English skills which have been recognized by people in and out of school environments.

At the end of the program, about 10% of students were evaluated as possessing outstanding ability in English due to their performance.

From the evidence of students' English development, it confirms that students selection process is on the right track even though there were not so many students to be selected from.

5.   Satisfaction of Students' Metacognitive Domain.

Students, teachers, parents and administrators were highly satisfied with the development of students' thinking management, moral and social skills. The program had infected into students the sense of responsibility, team work and leadership. It also expanded their creativity and problem-solving skills. It made them gain more self-confidence and self-reliance. It taught then to care for others, being able to control their emotions and stress levels. It motivated them to search for knowledge and self development. All in all, it has prepared them well for their future lives.

With the satisfactions mentioned above, it could be concluded that the program has been a success.

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