

## **Factors Obstructing English Teaching Effectiveness: Teacher Voices from Thailand's Deep South**

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### Abstract

Administering English language teaching (ELT) in rural settings of the three southern border provinces has been challenging for both teachers and learners due to two decades of political unrest, eruptions of violence, fears, and insecurity. To enhance ELT, this study aimed to investigate factors affecting the ineffectiveness of ELT in these three educational environments and introduce a new lens of contextualized English instructions for learners in schools located in Southernmost Thailand, where learners live amid linguistic and cultural diversity. In this qualitative study, data were collected from teachers operating in two schools of each province (totaling six institutions) by semi-structured interviews and analyzed by content analysis. Findings revealed that five primary factors deteriorating English language learning efficiency in the three southern border provinces were Implementation of Broad-Spectrum ELT Policies; Insufficient Teaching Integrations with Islamization; Inadequate Awareness of the Significance of English; Inconsistencies between ELT Textbooks and the Sociolinguistic Reality of English; and Impractical Classroom Arrangement. The findings could be beneficial if they are further utilized by the Ministry of Education in establishing policies for ELT in specific contexts as well as school administrators and teachers in formulating instructional approaches, managing learning resources, and arranging classrooms based on local needs and identities. Although this study has a specific spatial scope, which is the three southern border provinces of Thailand, its findings can be adapted for a broader application as a part of the global perspective and a clue to solve language learning problems across ELT communities encountering a similar challenge.

*Keywords:* English language teaching, private Islamic schools, rural education, 21st-century education

The number of people utilizing English as a global language has been significantly growing, especially among non-native speakers with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, many nations, including Thailand, have policies to prioritize the uplifting of English language proficiencies as part of their human resources development processes towards cultivating 21st-century global citizenship (Baker & Fang, 2020). In Thailand, where this study was conducted, although most learners in Thailand are exposed to compulsory ELT from primary to higher education, learners' English language mastery remained unsatisfactory compared to those in neighboring countries in the region, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. According to Education First (2020), Thai citizens' average level of English proficiency ranked 89th from 100 non-native English-speaking countries worldwide and 20th from 24 countries in Asia. As evident in past years, this discovery also confirmed that Thailand remained below average compared to its neighbors such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. Although several studies had addressed ELT problems and challenges in Thailand (Imsa-ard, 2020; Putri, 2020; Somjai, & Soontornwipast, 2020), the contexts of private Islamic schools, especially in the Deep South region or the three southern border provinces, including Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, were uninvestigated. Compared to the general demographics of Thailand, Deep South is a unique region because most students are Muslim, living with the Islamic culture. Furthermore, they use Malay as the first language and primary language in everyday communication and use Thai and English as the second and third languages, respectively. Considering this uniqueness and the limited number of studies on the context, ELT problems in deep south private Islamic schools are worth exploring.

Hence, this study primarily aimed to examine problems and needs that ELT teachers had while teaching in deep south private Islamic schools with contextual uniqueness. Results were projected to offer beneficial insights into practical and strategic teaching development. The insights would be especially fruitful to teachers and administrators in charge of ELT in private Islamic schools seeking to foster pedagogical quality, reconceptualize ELT processes for a 21st-century education, and emphasize skill development for students rather than content deliveries (Fang & Baker, 2018; Fang & Ren, 2018; Meyer & Norman, 2020). With a deeper understanding, the provision of ELT that recognizes local and global dynamics is expected to prepare students more effectively for 21st-century global citizenship and equip them with relevant skills and readiness to survive in modern society with fair living quality.

## **Literature Review**

### **ELT in Thailand**

Since the world has witnessed a notable increase of English language users and learners every year, English has become a global and primary lingua franca for many users across cultures (Baker & Fang, 2020; Galloway, 2017; Galloway & Rose, 2018, 2021; Rose & Galloway, 2017, 2019; Rose, McKinley, & Galloway, 2021). Based on this phenomenon, schools in many countries, including Thailand, subsequently added ELT to their curriculum to ensure that human resources are prepared for future English communication in learning and professional environments. Although English is not an official language in Thailand, ELT courses are compulsory and provided from elementary to tertiary levels of education (Khamkhien, 2010; Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). English has become even more essential to Thai citizens after Thailand officially joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015. Within the new AEC sphere, professionals can now work closer together regardless of sovereign borders, and there is no exception for Thai citizens. To convey messages in multicultural settings, AEC members use English as a lingua

franca when they work, commute to places, receive education, and share social spaces with others in ASEAN (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Zein & Stroupe, 2018). To address the emerging needs for enhancing English proficiency, there has been a constantly growing demand worldwide for English language education, as English literacy is key to success in the globalized world.

To cultivate Thai students as global citizens and offer them access to fair quality of a future life, English is a gateway to achieving these goals. Hence, to equip Thai students with English language competencies, the Thai Ministry of Education has injected lump sums of funding to educational institutions across the country and required them to organize English language development projects for students and teachers over the past years, including domestic and offshore English language training and boot camps. Nevertheless, the outcomes have been far from satisfying. Grubbs, Chaengploy, and Worawong (2009) and Phungphol (2005) pointed out that a factor promoting positive ELT outcomes and English language development for students is the choice of instructional approach. Similarly, the current obstructing factor of ELT in Thailand is the dominance of a traditional teaching approach, known as “chalk and talk.” This instructional method is substantially teacher-centered and lecture-based. Students are expected to memorize content for examination. Exchanges of ideas in class are minimal or not encouraged. Those who are good listeners are viewed as behaviorally desirable. They are also expected to jot down notes from verbal lectures but not to interrupt by raising questions. Nevertheless, education in the 21st century has changed considerably, and today’s ELT styles do not resemble many features of changing educational models.

### **ELT in Thai Private Islamic Schools**

This study was conducted at private Islamic schools, educational institutions known to have played a critical role in developing the Muslim society of ASEAN for a long time, such as in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, and Singapore (Margono, 2012). Most private Islamic schools in Thailand are geographically located towards the South, especially in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. Currently, several of these private Islamic schools are providing secular-Islamic curriculum. Muslim parents in the Deep South prefer admitting their children to these schools because Islamic and secular courses are offered together. In terms of ELT performances, it is essential to note that private Islamic schools did not take a conventional approach in providing education, and overall English language scores have been unsatisfactory, as evident in the lower average score on the annual national examination than those of other regions in Thailand (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2017). To this issue, Binmadnee, Abdulsata, and Haji (2018) explored ELT problems in higher secondary education provided by private Islamic schools in the Deep South and revealed many findings. For instance, it was reported that the ELT courses offered in the Deep South did not address local needs, promote learning, or serve as a tool, such as a language training laboratory, that facilitates effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, the implemented learning activities were inconsistent with modern learning strategies. The teaching also lacked supplemental learning materials and up-to-date measurements. Furthermore, teachers lacked the desirable qualifications and traits of highly qualified language educators. Similarly, Srisueb and Wasanasomsithi (2010) assessed ELT problems that students of private Islamic schools in Narathiwat encountered and suggested that attitudes were reportedly a barrier. More specifically, the students did not believe that English was an essential language for them because it had minimal useful implications in daily life. Another problem that these students encountered was learning difficulties. For instance, the students felt that English grammatical rules were excessively complex. In addition, they also indicated that they struggled to form English sentences when writing, pronounce specific English words, and listen for main ideas.

Due to budget constraints, many schools in the three southern border provinces did not have suitable teaching materials. The situation has made the provision of ELT courses challenging and ineffective while unnecessarily slowing down the students' development of English proficiencies. Therefore, it is urgently necessary for the school administrators and teachers to jointly plan and design English language development policies and align their curriculum and instructional models with the development of 21st-century skills.

Moreover, Assalihee, Boonsuk, Bakoh, and Sano (2019) synthesized ASEAN schools' administrative and teaching models from administrators and teachers in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore and discovered guidelines for maneuvering 21st-century ELT in private Islamic schools, which included considering new roles and duties of teachers; emphasizing proactive and cooperative learning; integrating technology in education; associating with local learning resources; integrating the science of learning with other types of sciences; and designing a new 21st-century learner assessment model. The study also suggested that educational stakeholders value and recognize contextual differences, including learners' geographical locations and cultural diversity, to genuinely address learners' needs. This notion is especially applicable to the Deep South of Thailand, which is where most locals are Malay Muslims who share different linguistic and cultural identities from most of the learners across Thailand. The diversity among learners' identities is crucial, and educational stakeholders in ELT must consider the identity mosaic when planning for school administration, designing teaching management, formulating policies, and drafting curriculum. To address the research gap and identify root causes of failure in the administration of ELT in the three southern border provinces, this study aimed to answer the research question:

1. What factors are obstructing ELT efficiency in the three southern border provinces of Thailand?"

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Contexts and Participants**

The Deep South was chosen as this study's spatial scope due to its unique identities shaped by locals with distinctive ethnicities such as Malay and religious beliefs such as Islam compared with the majority of the Thai population. As a result, the Deep South is a region filled with private Islamic schools offering blended secular-Islamic curriculum. Furthermore, since the area is bordered by Malaysia, many locals are bilingual who can communicate in Thai and Malay. Based on these facts, this spatial context is particularly noteworthy to explore how English language education is administered as a third language.

This study employed a qualitative approach. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 18 key informants, including lower English teachers in six private Islamic schools in the Deep South of Thailand. Breaking down the number, three key informants were selected from each of the six schools. Furthermore, two of these schools were purposively selected from each of the three southern border provinces, including Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, given that the schools must 1) have obtained 2020's mean national achievement test score in English Language and Communication lower than the national mean, which is 33.67/100 (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2020), 2) have been established for at least ten years and provided English language education throughout their existence, and 3) possess an official status as a private Islamic school under the Office of the Private Education Commission, Ministry of Education. Similarly, purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, &

Morrison, 2018; Creswell, 2013) with specific inclusion criteria were used to select the key informants based on the research aims. The English teachers were included based on their qualifications in ELT, teaching experiences of more than ten years, teaching duties at the lower secondary level of no less than 15 periods a week, and records of teaching students in multiple grades from Lower Secondary to Upper Secondary, which is as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Teachers' Demographics*

Teachers (T)	Site (S)	Age	Genders	Education background	Years of teaching experience	No. of teaching hours
T1	S1	36	F	BEd in English	13	18
T2	S1	42	F	BEd in English	20	18
T3	S1	43	F	BEd in English	20	19
T4	S2	33	M	BA in English & Dip. in Teaching	10	16
T5	S2	33	F	BE in Islamic Studies, International Program	10	18
T6	S2	52	F	BEd in English	30	19
T7	S3	35	F	BEd in English	12	15
T8	S3	33	F	BA in English	10	18
T9	S3	37	M	BEd in English & MEd in School Admin.	14	18
T10	S4	40	F	BEd in English & MEd in School Admin.	15	16
T11	S4	32	F	BEd in English	11	19
T12	S4	33	F	BEd in English	10	18
T13	S5	56	F	BEd in English	25	17
T14	S5	34	F	BEd in Business English & Dip. in Teaching	11	19
T15	S5	33	F	BEd in English	10	18
T16	S6	34	F	B.A. in English & Dip. in Teaching	11	18
T17	S6	34	F	BEd in English	11	19
T18	S6	33	F	BEd in English	10	15

### Data Collection and Analysis

In the initial phase, relevant school administrators were contacted and asked to allow data to be collected and interviews to be conducted with their teachers. The selected teachers were also

contacted and asked if they would like to voluntarily contribute to the research by interviewing. After enough key informants were obtained based on the criteria, consent forms were given out for the interviewees to sign. Subsequently, interview schedules were set, including dates, times, and venues at the interviewees' convenience.

The three main questions used in this study were formulated based on a study related to ELT in private Islamic schools (Binmadnee et al., 2018). Essentially, the developed questions were 1) What are the current situations of ELT in private Islamic schools? 2) What are critical factors affecting the effectiveness of ELT management in private Islamic schools? 3) What are required or needed for teachers to teach English in the context of private Islamic schools? In addition, three probing questions were also prepared and only asked when further clarification was needed from the interviewees. More specifically, the questions included 1) How is teaching English in private Islamic schools different from other schools? 2) Who are the current primary obstacles in ELT? Are they the teachers, students, school administrators, or public agencies? 3) What action needs to be taken as urgently as possible to maximize the effectiveness of ELT in private Islamic schools? All the questions were assessed by three experts to improve item-objective congruence. Adjustments were subsequently made following their feedback. Eventually, pilot interviews were conducted with three English teachers who were not the key informants to find out whether these questions were accurate, on point, and provided meaningful results so that they could be further implemented in the formal interviews.

Before each interview session, the interviewees were asked for permission for audio recording. The interviewees were also informed that this study did not affect any of their assessments. Furthermore, the interviewees acknowledged that if they felt uncomfortable with the study, they could withdraw from participation at any time. The interviews were conducted primarily in Thai, and each session was approximately 40-50 minutes. After the interviews, the audio logs were transcribed and translated into English, and the transcription was sent to each corresponding interviewee for accuracy validation. Eventually, the data were analyzed by qualitative content analysis to construct contextual interpretations, identify patterns, and establish facts (Dörnyei, 2007; Patton, 2002). Top-down coding was utilized to generate a classification of data based on preconceived codes matching research focuses, and bottom-up coding was also applied to create other codes from the resultant data (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). The interview data were repeatedly read and checked throughout the data analysis process to ensure that every emerging theme relevant to the study was extracted. Once the themes were obtained, they were organized and categorized for consistencies and coded into thematic results to present data interrelatedness. More specifically, the data were coded using three steps, including data sorting, interpreting, and theorizing (Lewins & Silver, 2007, pp. 262–267). Towards the end of the analysis, redundant subthemes were merged into a larger theme, while the irrelevant ones were removed. On top of that, efforts were taken to increase the anonymity of the data and prevent any potential identification of the participants. Hence, each excerpt presented in the Findings section utilizes pseudonyms and redacts identifiable names. For instance, T1S1 refers to Teacher 1 at Site 1.

## Findings

The interview data obtained from the 18 teachers in the six schools in the Deep South revealed that five primary issues causing teachers' inefficiency in ELT and students' low English language proficiencies were as follows:

## **Implementation of Broad-Spectrum ELT Policies**

As pointed out in the interviews, most of the key informants agreed that the current English language education policy in Thailand was not practical and needed reconceptualization, especially when it is applied to the secular-Islamic education system implemented in private Islamic schools in the three southern border provinces (see Excerpts 1 and 2) where students had been exposed to different linguacultural upbringings from those in other regions of Thailand.

### ***Excerpt 1 (T1S1)***

There are ministerial and school policies on English language education, but the school has limitations, so it has not implemented all the ministerial policies. Since our school is a private religious school offering religious courses, we must allocate some class periods for religious education. Hence, we have less time to run secular courses, such as English subjects.

### ***Excerpt 2 (T5S2)***

The currently implemented school policy for ELT seems inconsistent and does not address school contexts, emphasizing more on the teaching of Arabic than English, and the school could not manage to run a schedule based on the requirement of the Ministry of Education's curriculum policy, requiring a minimum of five lessons per week. The school could only do three lessons per week because it is necessary to allocate time for religious studies as well, and with this allocation, we do not have enough time for ELT.

As stated above, the policy applied to private Islamic schools presented a significant contextual mismatch. Hence, teachers recommended that the Ministry of Education or the Office of Private Education solve problems through a curricular integration by removing less relevant courses and adding more English classes. Furthermore, desirable learning competencies for foreign language communication, especially English, were also suggested to be determined. Another recommended solution was to use English as a medium of instruction in non-English courses to offer more opportunities to practice the language. Simultaneously, it might be wise for the policy to also provide relevant ELT training for teachers in these schools (see Excerpts 3 and 4).

### ***Excerpt 3 (T10S4)***

The government or the Ministry of Education should issue policies that encourage schools to revise their curriculums by integrating English into every subject to promote English language learning. Similarly, contents related to Islamic Studies could also be added to English courses. Doing so would encourage students to see the value of learning English even more because they get to appreciate the religion and the language at the same time. As for the school, it is ready to change and welcome the new teaching style if there is a clear policy from the government side.

### ***Excerpt 4 (T16S6)***

Because the school does not have enough English language teachers for teaching, the policy that should be implemented is related to the recruitment of government employees to perform these teaching duties in private Islamic schools. This policy would provide opportunities and



equality to students in terms of access to qualified teachers. Also, teachers should know about teaching integrations to teach religious content using English to better address school contexts.

### **Insufficient Teaching Integrations with Islamization**

On this note, the key informants believed that one of the practical teaching methods that could stimulate learning attention and enhance students' competence is associating in- and off-class teaching activities with learners' identities. To elaborate, they agreed that it is vital for the Islamic ways of life to be integrated with ELT speaking, reading, and presenting activities. Students could have a conversation, read an article, and present ideas on topics that are Islamic related in English (see Excerpt 5 and 6). Furthermore, students could take a field trip to places of interest with Islamic and historical significance in the communities where they live to practice presenting information about these sites in English (see Excerpt 7). However, although the integrations and Islamization were perceived as an appropriate adaptation towards providing 21st-century education, the findings also suggested that most English teachers in the Deep South did not pay adequate attention to the practical side of the integrations.

#### ***Excerpt 5 (T7S3)***

I believe applying Islamic values in class makes teaching easier. It is like the kids already have prior knowledge, and the only thing we need to do is switch from talking with the familiar Thai language to English. For instance, when you assign topics for them to practice speaking or making presentations, you should propose topics related to the Islamic culture. If you want them to practice reading, you can find the history of Prophet Muhammad in English for them to read, or you can introduce them to important Islamic days such as Hari Raya (Eid al-Fitr) or the importance of the Ramadan month for further discussion.

#### ***Excerpt 6 (T12S4)***

There are many Islamic books and learning resources in English on the Internet and YouTube. But those realistically consistent with local school contexts yet remain limited. Personally, I think that teachers can use media from other sources, but the main problem is that they are still too attached to textbooks even though they are not integrated with Islam. This problem may be because teachers do not have enough time to prepare materials or possess integration skills. Schools must train teachers, and the government must also support their development.

#### ***Excerpt 7 (T14S5)***

There are many important historical Islamic sites around the school and the community here, so I think English learning activities can be organized by linking to learners' familiar environments, such as locations where they live. For example, you can take the students to Krue Se Mosque, set up a tour guide club, create videos to introduce the location in English, and present them in class. Active learning provides exciting learning experiences, but teachers here rarely consider doing it.

### **Inadequate Awareness of the Significance of English**

Another critical barrier perceivably diminishing the English learning performance, lowering English language proficiencies, and deteriorating learning motivation was the missing prioritization due to inadequate awareness of the significance of English (see Excerpts 8 to 9).

***Excerpt 8 (T1S1)***

Most of the students I teach at school do not like learning English because they think English is excessively complicated, and they do not have a subject-specific knowledge capital.

***Excerpt 9 (T9S3)***

I have talked to many students, especially those living in rural areas. They expressed that English was not necessary because they did not have a chance to use it daily. So, they thought it was not essential or valuable. Since they live in rural areas and had limited access to English language development as they grew up, they were not interested in learning the language. Some schools focus on teaching Arabic and Malay. Therefore, English has become less relevant, and only a few hours of English subjects were allocated and taught as a result.

Based on the said limitation, the teachers suggested a strategy to motivate learners in line with the contexts of private Islamic schools, which is by supplementarily employing native English teachers so that students can familiarize themselves with native English speakers and sense that English is one of the essential languages in everyday life. Another strategy to motivate learning is the use of modern media. Students should be allowed to access such media more conveniently. In addition, more English courses should be added per week, and they should focus on fun factors in communication rather than grammatical correctness (see Excerpts 10 and 11).

***Excerpt 10 (T18S6)***

There are three core English language subjects a week. They are considered not enough. The subject should be taught every day. Schools should add extra English language courses, but they must be fun to learn and focus on communication. They must not put pressure on the students or make them feel like English is difficult to master.

***Excerpt 11 (T6S2)***

Teacher diversity should be utilized. International teachers might help. The school has brought international students from universities to school, and they did activities with the students. It appeared the students enjoyed the moments very much, expressed their eagerness to get to know these international students, and demonstrated seeing values in language learning because understanding a language gives them the ability to communicate with international people.

From the interview data, there were several factors influencing students' attitudes towards English language learning. (1) It was students' personal decision to dislike English since they had lower foundation knowledge of English (see Excerpt 8); (2) The students lived in non-English-speaking environments, requiring minimal real-world usage of English as a primary language. In many cases, the students spent most of their lives traveling back and forth between homes and schools, and they did not have many opportunities to go out, learn something new, or live in any other unfamiliar communities (see Excerpt 9); (3) Not much time was allocated for English language lessons per week because the students simultaneously studied secular and Islamic courses. Hence, their exposure to the use of English remained low (see Excerpt 10).

## **ELT Cultural contents**

Based on the logic that English has become a global language and no citizens from a specific nation, such as the USA or the UK, could claim exclusive ownership of the language, most informants believed that currently utilized English language courses, including textbooks, were not effectively designed for them and they were not practical in addressing real-world contexts. Contents and images presented in these materials looked unfamiliar to them, leaving significant learning gaps since the students had difficulty associating them with their backgrounds (see excerpts 12 and 13).

### ***Excerpt 12 (T9S3)***

Textbooks are too broad and far learners' environments. Contents are about European, British, and Canadian cultures. Let me use sports as an example, western sports are illustrated, such as skiing and baseball. The students looked confused when I taught them about these sports.

### ***Excerpt 13 (T15S5)***

The content in the textbooks does not correspond to the contexts of our learners. Images are full of western tourist attractions and western meals like pizzas, burgers, and steaks. Similarly, the reading content often features British and American cultures, such as Halloween and Christmas. Most of the students did not even know about them. It was difficult for them to imagine, and it was not easy for teachers to teach them either because the students did not know what to say.

From the above data, most ELT textbooks in Thailand seemed biased with content choices as they emphasized that western cultures perceivably belong to native speakers of the British and American English varieties. On the contrary, students' cultures were not included in these textbooks and not substantially mentioned in ELT. To address this problem, some informants (see Excerpts 14 and 15) recommended that the efficiency of deep south ELT could be enhanced by selecting textbooks that offer multicultural content, including learners' and other cultures. Furthermore, it would be wise avoid emphasizing western cultures if teachers would like to enrich English language learning experiences for their students as a positive atmosphere promotes learning motivation and positive attitudes towards learning English.

### ***Excerpt 14 (T7S3)***

I would like to say that teaching content should be a mixture of western and local cultures to facilitate our students as they study English. Lessons should contain multicultural content. It would be even more optimal if students' cultures could be incorporated into the learning. If the students could study English through their cultures, I am sure they will get excited as if the content were genuinely about their lives.

### ***Excerpt 15 (T4S2)***

We live in a multicultural society here. There are people of various religions and races living together. I think a suitable English language textbook for our students here would be the one presenting through multicultural content. It would be a plus if there is content about students' cultures in it.

## **Impractical Classroom Arrangement**

Appropriate classroom arrangement was a success factor in enhancing English language proficiencies for deep south students. An ideal classroom would be the one that allows students to talk, exchange, and discuss ideas. In reality, however, it was found that the students were too shy to raise and share opinions with their classmates or teachers. The interviews revealed a noteworthy answer, reflecting that many teachers did not attempt to arrange their classrooms. In fact, seats were reportedly left unadjusted, meaning that they were sorted into the usual row patterns front to back. However, this seating strategy did not facilitate discussion- and activity-based learning (see Excerpts 14 and 15).

### ***Excerpt 16 (T14S5)***

I tried to figure out how to get my students to actively engage in in-class discussions and activities. Before every activity, we usually brainstormed for ideas, but the usual seating did not help with the discussion because the students could only turn to a particular direction when they sit in rows. So, it was not easy to organize activities in a classroom with that kind of seating arrangement.

### ***Excerpt 17 (T1S1)***

In fact, there were several causes. The one that stood out was classroom management, especially the seating arrangements that did not allow the students to turn to one another to discuss ideas. The conventional seating forced them only to face their teachers in front of the classroom.

To motivate students, enhance their participation, and encourage them to exchange ideas with the class, many teachers introduced new classroom seating patterns. They suggested that seats and tables could be set in a pattern for students to face each other, such as circular and U-shaped designs. The seating could also change from period to period based on learning activities. The findings discovered that after the teachers rearranged their seats and tables, students engaged more in discussion and significantly shared more ideas with their classmates (see Excerpts 18-19).

### ***Excerpt 18 (T11S4)***

To tone the atmosphere for discussion and give students opportunities to share more ideas and experiences, I suddenly decided to rearrange seats and tables in my classroom into all kinds of shapes from the U shape on one day to the O shape on the following day. The students got to sit in large and small groups, depending on the activities that we did.

### ***Excerpt 19 (T13S5)***

After doing it for a while, I asked the students for feedback. They told me that they liked it when I organize the classroom like this. It was not boring, and it added colors to the learning. They did not feel uncomfortable having to sit like this. More importantly, some said they wanted every classroom to be like this one because they do not want to feel bad for being seen as a slacker sitting towards the back of the room.

## Discussion

The findings provided teachers' reflections confirming that there were five primary factors or causes that shared significant influences on ELT efficiency levels in private Islamic schools in the Deep South of Thailand. To begin with, most of the key informants agreed that they had experienced broad-spectrum and top-down ELT policies (Ahuja, 2011; Kaur, Young, & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The central administration designed most of the policies and courses, possibly based on a limited understanding of local contexts. Hence, the incorporation of local resources for learning was neglected. However, the Deep South of Thailand is a unique region as it is home to the Muslim majority. Muslim students strictly follow the Islamic way of life, which is different from most learners in Thailand. Therefore, ELT follows contextual suitability and practicality, considering the uniqueness that deep south students share. It is crucial for local practitioners to have more opportunities to design curriculum and construct guidelines for instructional management following students' cultural identities. This contextual awareness could add pride to the learning and help students learn through simplified or tailored content based on existing real-world knowledge. To elaborate, Islamic contents and values that reflect students' identities should be integrated into private Islamic schools' ELT in the Deep South. Furthermore, textbooks for Thai Muslim students must be carefully selected to diversify contents since it is no longer necessary to study English by attaching to a specific culture or an ethnic group. More importantly, ELT should introduce more links to Islamic values and cultures and fewer links to western cultures because western knowledge is a far-flung concept beyond most students' imagination (Prabjandee, 2020; Rajprasit & Marlina, 2019). With this transformation, students are given opportunities to compare western cultures with theirs via tailored textbooks and explore the current English diversity. Ideal ELT textbooks for deep south Muslim students are those customized to contain content on their unique cultural identities and the Islamic way of life. Nevertheless, the current practices of integrating Islam with ELT had not been a popular choice in these private Islamic schools, and those who did still faced several limitations, including the teaching required to adhere to national policies, teachers lacking the practical knowledge to pull off an effective integration, and Thai educational stakeholders preferring to introduce students to western cultures while marginalizing their very cultures (Tarrayo, Ulla, & Lekwilai, 2020).

Another significant issue that was addressed by the key informants was the inequality of access to learning resources between students in regular and special classes. Many schools had policies to offer students opportunities to study in special classes with privileged access to more resources than those in regular classes. This act of separating students into categories seemed discriminatory and could directly impact academic achievement (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017). Those who lack access to learning opportunities might not perform well in education eventually. Rather, the goal of education could be to equally provide skill development for every student to grow up as a quality global citizen with the required competencies to face the rapidly changing world. Hence, educational inequality is another problem that requires the attention of school administrators and officers in relevant agencies, especially in private Islamic schools in the Deep South where students have been living with prolonged political unrest and frequent eruptions of violent incidents. Therefore, to prevent and reduce possible educational disparities, the government and concerned third parties involved in educational development should investigate strategies for facilitating greater access to high quality teaching and learning for all students. At the same time, schools must strive ensure equal treatment is given to each student.

Moreover, the findings also indicated that levels of awareness of the significance of English were significantly linked to the effectiveness of ELT. This notion suggested that if students recognize the importance of the language, they might also understand the consequence of not knowing it. In other words, how much they value English can be measured through positive changes in their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors towards learning the language (Baker, 2015; Bartram, 2010; Garrett, 2010). Hence, educational stakeholders, especially teachers, should actively foster this positive awareness for their students. They should seek to tone their classroom atmospheres to promote effective and meaningful English language learning, offer students some opportunities to take part in designing their English learning activities, introduce off-class learning experiences, and constantly create situations for them to practice English by involving as many interlocutors from diverse linguacultural backgrounds as possible.

The findings also indicated that there is another aspect of ELT that demands thoughtful consideration. Evidently, most English language teachers remained in conventional classroom designs and arrangements where students had to sit in rows and turn their backs to their peers. This type of classroom arrangement is often considered to be antiquated in the 21st century and could even lead to discriminatory practices as some front-row students could be viewed as intelligent, whereas back-row students could be perceived as slow learners. Today's learning activities require students to actively engage in discussion, collaboration, and presentation of ideas with free space for imagination to run wild (Harvey & Kenyon, 2013). Many classroom arrangements are proven to support students throughout their learning challenges and help ease depressive feelings for some who were once viewed negatively as back-row students because back rows could be eliminated in these new classrooms, for instance, arranged as an open space, in a U shape, with a seat switching agreement, with group seating, or with an ultra-large writing board added. Unfortunately, many schools face efficiency barriers such as limited budgets, inflexible classroom spaces, and even the lack of readiness of teachers.

### **Conclusion**

English serves as a gateway to broader educational and professional opportunities. The findings confirmed that ELT in the 21st century has changed towards acknowledging local contexts more and European cultures less. Implementing contextualized textbooks with more local content and integrating information and communications technology (ICT) are not the only options teachers should resort to for their ELT. They are suggested to expose their students to off-class experiences and surround them with locally available English language learning experiences and resources. Locally accessible learning tools can be priceless, ideal, authentic, and effective learning materials utilizable if schools lack access to relevant resources. Another highly recommended option is online media. Modern technology grants equal English language learning opportunities to students regardless of their residential areas. Private Islamic schools in the Deep South are in a unique position because they are surrounded by Malay Muslims born and bred in a Malaysian culture. Local lifestyles are substantially different from those of other regions in the country. Since they live in unique geography along the coasts of the Andaman Sea and the Pacific Ocean, people have unique occupations and ways of life. Teachers should take advantage of this knowledge and take their classrooms to a new level by exposing their students to real-world experiences. The diverse cultural backgrounds of the students can be factored in by contextualizing and Islamizing ELT based on diverse ways of life and faith. By adding these values to ELT, students might be convinced to begin developing the language because it would make more sense for them to study English if it is about their familiar cultures. The government issue policies to support the emphasis of learning through local content and avoid pressuring locals to implement curriculum, books, and content introduced by the central

administration. Additionally, financial support should be provided to increase resource availability and provide professional training for teachers based on local contexts.

The study presented noteworthy reflections of English teachers in private Islamic schools that were thought-provoking and enlightening. The same reflections can inform school leaders when formulating their English language development policies and practical guidelines for private Islamic schools. Furthermore, the insights might be especially beneficial to school administrators when designing training activities for their teachers and support staff based on school contexts. To clarify, the research findings can serve as a guideline when designing school ELT policies and programs to address learning needs and contexts using learners' local cultural contents. Furthermore, teachers could also review these findings as they develop their teaching strategies and collaborate with other teachers to create English teaching materials to increase learning excitement and effectiveness.

In other words, teachers can design ELT activities and materials to include more diverse elements, such as content related to learner identities. By doing so, learners have more opportunities to practice English through imaginable, familiar, or tangible components around them. Hence, school administrators and teachers in Thailand are suggested to consider providing their students with ELT activities that involve existing knowledge and familiar local cultures when making policies and designing ELT curriculums (Galloway & Rose, 2018; Jindapitak, Teo, & Savski, 2022; Prabjandee & Fang, 2022). Future studies are suggested to expand this exploration to a quantitative dimension to obtain data on the needs and practices of English teachers in private Islamic schools that can substantially represent the teacher population. In addition, further studies could focus on skill development while integrating Islamic studies and other disciplines into English language courses and the production of English textbooks that address school contexts.

Note that this study had some limitations in its data collection since it was conducted during the outbreak of COVID-19. Consequently, some interview sessions were canceled, postponed, and rescheduled because schools were ordered to shut down, and participants had contracted COVID-19. Some target schools were small and did not have enough teachers. As a result, they were forced to partially use those without ELT qualifications.

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