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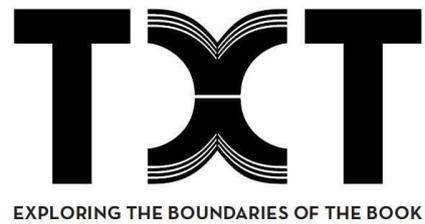
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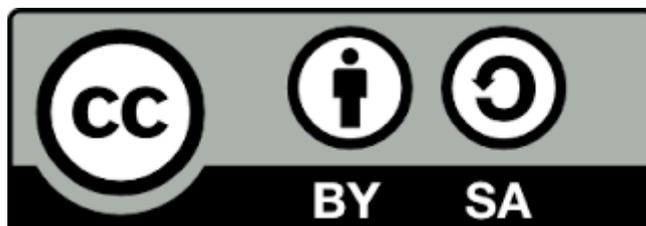
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# Using Listening to Encourage Reading in Thailand

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## Introduction

In 2013, Bangkok was chosen to be the World's book capital of the year. The announcement amazed many people because, at the same time, there was a shocking statistic released by UNESCO on the latest International Literacy Day stating that: 'Thais only read eight lines per year'.<sup>1</sup> This statement caused an uproar among Thai book lovers, since it was a flawed calculation based on the ratio of the total Thai population and the number of books sold 'legally' per year. Nonetheless, during the past few years there has been a wide concern that there is a reading crisis in Thailand and something needs to be done to solve the problem before Thailand becomes a member of the ASEAN Community in 2015.

According to the National Statistical Office of Thailand,<sup>2</sup> in 2011 68.6% of Thai people who are over five years old read. The problem seems fairly severe because only 5% of them read daily, while approximately 51% of Thais only read occasionally. Another problem is the lack of reliable studies on reading levels up to the present day. For most Thais reading is not

a habit. There have been many efforts to encourage reading in Thailand for a long time, but most attempts have proven to be ineffective and little progress has been made. Every year, the funds for promoting reading are wasted on temporary superficial events such as the Thai national book fairs which take place twice per year and merely last two weeks. It would be no exaggeration to say that these book fairs are the only substantial form of reading promotion that takes place. The Thai government has never spent funding on sustainable projects which could benefit the country's reading in the long term. All things considered, it might be time to try approaching the problem from a new perspective, with a new method such as using listening to encourage reading. This essay is written with the purpose to explore the possibility of using listening to encourage reading. It will cover some background knowledge about reading culture in Thailand, reasons why the method could work and finally how to put the theory into practice.

## A brief history of reading and printing in Thailand

The first change to reading in Thailand was caused by the introduction of Western printing and book culture. Printing in Thailand is believed to have started in the late Ayutthaya Era (1351 -1767) during the reign of King Narai (Somdet Phra Narai Maharaj), in its most prosperous period. At that time, Ayutthaya, the former capital city of Thailand, opened its gates and welcomed foreigners who came in peace.

In 1662 Bishop Louis Laneau came to Siam<sup>3</sup> with French missionaries. He was active in propagating the Christian faith in Thailand by translating and publishing bibles, Thai grammar books and Thai-English dictionaries. Laneau made use of existing Roman types and originally printed his books in Europe before shipping them to Thailand. Later, in 1670, there was a request from the missionaries for making Thai types and setting up a printing house directly in Thailand as Thai laborers were cheap. Also there were a growing number of Thai scholars interested in learning about printing.

Printing machines were sent from France to Thailand and were used to produce teaching materials. King Narai granted the missionaries the freedom to teach Siamese people Christianity and Western knowledge such as science, law and other subjects, so long as they did

not contradict Siam's government or law. Because textbooks were important for teaching, a large number of books were printed in order to meet the needs of these new learners. Unfortunately, before they received Thai types, printing in Thailand was interrupted by a change of reign in 1688. None of the books from this period survived because they were either confiscated by King Phetracha in Siam or they were burned by the Burmese when they took over the city.

There were later attempts to reestablish printing culture

in Siam, but it was not successful as the country was at war. Then came the man who is considered by many to be 'the Father of printing in Thailand', Dr. Dan Beach Bradley M.D., an American missionary who arrived in Thailand in 1835. He brought Thai types

and a wooden printing press along with him and started his own printing house in Siam. Although Dr. Bradley's first intention was to propagate Christianity, he became more interested in the art of printing and started several printing-related businesses. In 1839, the first Thai official document, the proclamation against opium, was published. This was shortly followed by the first Thai newspaper: the *Bangkok Reader*. Driven by success and with support from the government, Dr. Bradley published more books by writing them himself and buying copyrights from other authors, which was the starting point of copyright

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in Thailand. It could be said that the printing business was mostly run by foreigners until the reign of King Vajiravudh (or Rama VI) who ruled the country from 1910 to 1925. Vajiravudh was fond of literature and had a keen Western mind. He wrote countless novels in a Western manner and rapidly improved printing techniques during his reign.

Western printing culture transformed both books and reading in Thailand. The shape of books suddenly changed when Dr. Bradley introduced a codex form. Formerly, books in Thailand were made by 'Lan's or 'Koi's leaves called "Samut Koi" (notebook made from Koi leaves) or "Samut Thai" (Thai's notebook).<sup>4</sup> These traditional books were written on a long piece of paper which was then folded back and forth to form a folded scroll shape. These 'books' were so sacred and delicate that they were forbidden to be carried by any commoners and only monks and aristocrats had direct access to these books. The only way commoners could access such text was by listening to recitations. In their modern form, books became more durable and portable. This allowed books to reach a wider group of readers.

On the basis of this brief history, it is obvious that reading culture in Thailand was not originally developed within the country by Thai people but was brought in by Westerners. To illustrate this point, consider reading culture as a plant: reading culture did not grow its roots in Thailand but was brought in later by the "grafting method". Without roots, Thai reading culture could not be as strong as it is in the Western world. Perhaps the Western method may not fit into the Thai context. It is important to let the development

process run its full course without interruption in order to finally come to the most suitable solution for one's culture. However, we cannot change the past, so the wise thing to do now is to find out what was missing in that transition.

To fill the gaps between Thai and the foreign reading culture, we have to consider where the Thai culture lifted off. Modern printing was established in Thailand during the first half of Rattanakosin Era (1782-1851), which was around the same time as the Golden Age of Thai literature. At that time, all important traditional Thai literature were written in poetic prose, consisting of dazzling internal and external rhythms which are pleasant to listen to. In other words, they were written for the sake of being read out loud. According to history, Thais preferred to listen to literature more than read it. People with high social status such as royalty and aristocrats, listened to the literature during royal plays in the courts, while literature intended for commoners was used in public plays.

A good example of this practice is 'Phra Aphai Mani', an adventure-fantasy story written by the most famous Thai poet of all time, Sunthorn Phu. It is considered to be the greatest poetry and literature of the early Rattanakosin era. One of the foreign printers made use of its popularity and published golden quotes from 'Phra Aphai Mani' in a small 'Samut Thai' form and sold them for only 1 Salueng (about half a euro cent) each. Despite the extremely low price, the profit was so large that he could afford to establish a printing house. Readers bought these books to recite the lines they liked over and over or to read them to their wives,

children and slaves.<sup>5</sup> Consequently the literature became a popular phenomenon in no time.

Reading was a shared experience and public reading was the norm at this time. This made sense as Thai poetry has a special rhythm. It may be read normally, but a specific form of reading out loud called 'Sepha' will make the poems sound like music to the ear. Sepha singers, like troubadours or Jaglars<sup>6</sup> in the western culture, were public readers and entertainers who recited stories from books for a living. While reciting poems, Sepha singers use two small sticks of wood called 'Krab' to give rhythm and emphasis combined with the use of expression, tones, and body language to make the stories more interesting. This kind of performance became the most popular form of entertainment for local people at that time.

Even today we can still see the appreciation of being read to in Thai everyday life. It has been evolving and is now taking a new form of media by using a combination of publishing and television. During these past five years, there has been a steep increase in the popularity and number of news television programmes. In 2008, there were twenty-nine television programmes running, which took about 11,260 minutes per

week.<sup>7</sup> The programme were usually run by two or three moderators who skim-read newspapers or scripts laid out before them, retelling the simplified stories to the audience in a casual manner, as if they were having a face-to-face conversation with the audience. Unlike ordinary news announcers, they shared their personal opinions and often spoke ad-lib. The announcers' personalities also played an important part in attracting ratings and, in a way, they became celebrities themselves.

This type of television programmes has gained incredible popularity among Thais for a number of reasons. In general, Thais prefer watching television over reading. According to the survey on reading conducted in 2011 by the National Statistical Office of Thailand, the main reasons for not reading are: a preference for television viewing, not having enough time and a negative attitude

towards reading and literacy.<sup>8</sup> People who work in big cities prefer watching these casual news television programmes instead of reading newspaper, because it fits in with their fast-paced metropolitan life. While people in the countryside find these programmes entertaining because they still prefer oral communication and they like to pass on stories by word-of-mouth.

Thai poetry has a special rhythm. It may be read normally, but a specific form of reading out loud called 'Sepha' will make the poems sound like music to the ear

Without a doubt, Thais have proven to be good listeners. But if listening has a strong link to reading, could this quality turn Thais into good readers too?

### The relations between listening and reading

There have been many recent attempts to investigate the relationship between the process of reading and listening. There is no definitive conclusion, but a large number of studies seem to suggest that listening and reading are closely interrelated activities.

In the early days of studying this topic, the focus was placed on the similarities of the reading and listening process. There were two widely accepted theories. One suggests<sup>9</sup> that the reading process is similar to, and parallels the listening process but there are no direct connections between them (Fig.1).

According to this theory, one hears a word and compares the word to one's personal vocabulary; in the same way one perceives a written word.

Unlike the first theory, the second one indicated that the reading process relies on the listening process. Many see listening as a crucial part of the reading process, while some even believe that reading develops from listening.<sup>11</sup> The general understanding is that reading begins when readers see the text, transform it into sounds in their heads and compare the sound to words they know (Fig. 2).

Recently there is more research supporting the latter theory that listening plays an important part in the reading process. This even extends to the case of silent reading. Today the act of 'silent reading' has become the norm. This kind

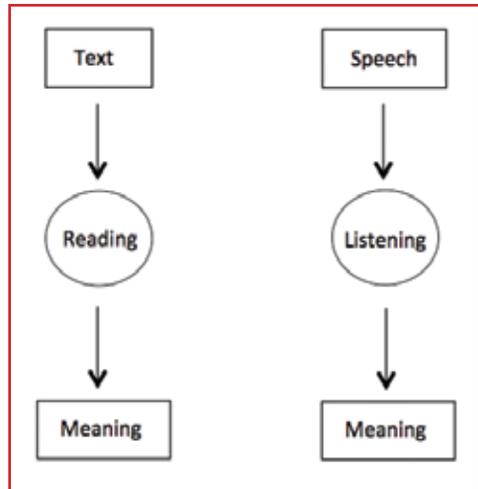


Fig. 1. Reading and listening processes as separate processes<sup>10</sup>

of reading was first recorded in AD 383, when Saint Augustine arrived in Milan and met Bishop Ambrose. Augustine was so amazed by the way Ambrose read he gives a detailed description of this act:

When he read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud.<sup>12</sup>

Modern readers would not find this act extraordinary, as it is their usual way of reading. Although silent reading has a long history and it did not become a common practice in the West until the tenth century. When reading was first invented, people read texts out loud and it stayed that way until people became experienced enough in reading. But does this mean readers do not make any sound at all

while reading?

One study shows that silent reading is not as silent as it seems.<sup>13</sup> In 2012 a team of neuroscientists conducted an experiment to compare the brain activity of a person reading to that of a person listening. The participants who have electroencephalographic electrodes implanted in their brain were asked to listen to

sounds and read selected texts. The results show that when the participants read texts there is high-frequency electrical activity in the same region of their brain as when the participants hear speech. The scientists also measured higher levels of brain activity when the participants were asked to read the texts carefully. In other words, they read 'out loud' to themselves while reading silently with their inner voice. The researchers believed that this inner voice is not triggered automatically but it might be enhanced by attention.

Another study conducted in 2013 provides further support for this theory.<sup>14</sup> The assumption of this study was that the human brain registers both external speech and an internal voice in the same manner. However, the researchers found out that the brain reacts to external speech and an internal reading voice differently. The inner voice is triggered when readers parse ordinary texts such as descriptive passages, but the brain processes speeches

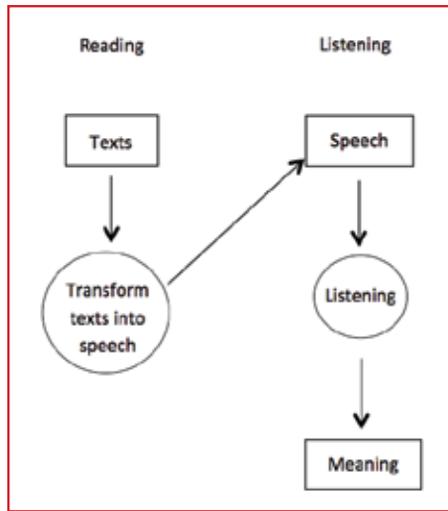


Fig. 2. Reading and listening as connected processes

or quotations from fictional characters in the same manner as external speech.

A third notable study of the relationship between listening and reading<sup>15</sup> conducted by David J. Townsend suggests that listening and reading proficiency are usually at the same level. That is to say people who are good at listening tend to be good at reading as well and

vice versa. This result leads to the strong possibility that listening and reading can be used to mutually improve each other.

### Ways to use listening to encourage reading in Thailand

As listening is an important component of reading it could be used to diminish the reading crisis in Thailand in various ways.

In 2013, the Thailand literacy rate was 93.5%.<sup>16</sup> However, there is no detailed survey on the literacy level in Thailand today, so the overall situation remains unclear. But most people are concerned with the reading level of the new generation, which seems to have dropped noticeably over these past years. The big problem we are facing now is an 'illiteracy relapse'. It is difficult for people with a working class background to maintain their literacy skills after completing a basic education. The lack of reading materials (the number of books available can be extremely small

and sometimes nonexistent) and poverty drives them to enter the labor market almost immediately after high school. Not to mention a large number of young people in rural areas who quit schools before getting a diploma.

To understand the situation precisely, we should identify the definition of literacy on different levels in order to help readers according to their reading ability. For example UNESCO<sup>17</sup> divided literacy into the following four levels:

**Basic level** refers to abilities in reading and writing in any single language.

**Second level** refers to abilities in reading, writing and numeracy in any single language.

**Third level** refers to abilities in reading, writing and numeracy in any single language and ability to use information technology as a tool for day-to-day communication.

**Fourth level** refers to high abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing any single language as well as abilities in numeracy and information technology as a tool for everyday communication. Being a learned citizen and having the ability to promote learning in the community, society and the nation.

If we use this UNESCO model to categorise people by their reading performance, the first two groups could benefit from using listening to maintain their literacy after school while the third and the fourth groups might be targeted in a different way. Even though it is universally known that reading is good, the act of reading itself is still a bitter pill for some. (The reasons for the negative attitude some Thai people hold towards reading will be discussed later). It surely takes

time and effort to change someone's opinion towards something, especially when the first impression is negative. Therefore it should be done in a smooth and tactful method by making use of something that disaffected people feel comfortable with such as listening. Hearing the texts read aloud could work as a bridge for illiterate people and beginners to leave their comfort zone and cross the bridge from listening to reading.

On a basic level, being read to has the potential to ignite the interest of the listener in literature. It also has an effect on the listeners' attitude towards books. It is not only suitable for children but also was proven to work on adults too. A good example of this is the tradition of cigar factories in Cuba.<sup>18</sup> In most cigar factories, there is a person who works as a 'lector' who would read out loud for the other workers while they roll cigars. The books range from historical texts to great poetries and are chosen in advance by the majority of the cigar-rollers according to their interests. The purpose of this activity when it was first invented, was to convey information to the illiterate people as they could not read journals. Not long after this activity began the workers gradually became more familiar with books and developed a positive feeling towards them. It was true that most of them could not gain full literacy from just listening to texts being read but a number of the workers began showing interest in reading and that was a good start. This tradition began in 1866 and it still continues in modern day Cuba. Despite the fact that there are new technologies that could replace lectors, the cigar-rollers still prefer being read to by their lector because the reader is 'a living

person who walks, who converses, and this cannot be replaced by anything or anybody.<sup>19</sup>

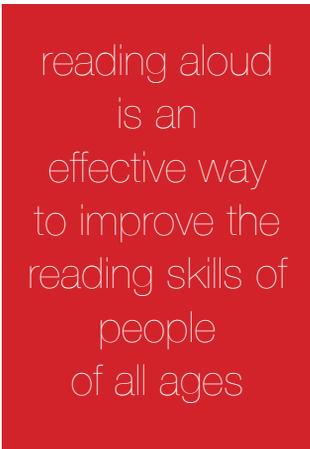
In Thailand, the practice of being read to can also be found in people's everyday life. Take radio drama for example: even with the flourishing of new kinds of entertainment, there are still a large number of Thai people, from the working classes to the rich, who are still fond of listening to Radio drama on CDs or mp3 players. It blends in with the lifestyle of people in the capital perfectly because it is almost the only entertainment that can be found during the infamous traffic jams of Bangkok. From time to time, one encounters taxi drivers who listen to a simplified version of great literature on a CD while driving. There is a relatively high chance that these listeners would buy a book of the same title or look for it in the library.<sup>20</sup> After all, books contain more details which might be omitted from the oral version. In this regard introducing audio books can be an interesting experiment. However, audio books are not available in the Thai language and very few people have the required proficiency to listen to English ones.

Like being read to, reading aloud is an effective way to improve the reading skills of people of all ages. Unfortunately, it is considered to be an act suitable for children and people who read out loud to themselves are sometimes perceived as amateur readers. As a matter of fact, reading out loud, even to one's self, is un-

expectedly beneficial. Smith Frank stated in his book that the human brain needs some time to process and record the texts that we read. Reading without making a sound will be too fast for the brain to take the data in, leading to partial oblivion.<sup>21</sup> In other words, reading out loud could enhance memory while reading.

The first critical step in promoting reading out loud is to change people's negative attitude towards it. In Thai primary school classrooms, the class is usually asked to read the text out loud. It is quite surprising that when the children read, they read it out loud in the most unnatural way. It sounds like nothing you would hear in everyday life and maybe this is the only situation in which this kind of reading seems normal. The students would all together drawl the words by extending and prolonging syllables, making their speech sound monotonous and boring. Actually, the way they read harms their understanding, because it is not natural speech.

Sadly, some people subconsciously grew up connecting reading to boredom since they were forced to read books they had no interest in for school. While in fact, reading can be enjoyed for leisure or as a hobby as it is called 'reading for pleasure'. If Thais only ever read for educational success, they may read until they finish school, but if they read for the sake of reading, they will read for life. Additionally a study conducted by the Institute of Education shows that children ages between 10 to 16 years old who read for fun make more progress in their study than those who rarely read.<sup>22</sup>



reading aloud  
is an  
effective way  
to improve the  
reading skills of  
people  
of all ages

Last but not least the promotion of reading out loud could lead to a resurrection of public reading. A significant factor that holds back the reading levels in Thailand nowadays is book prices. The prices are so high that even the middle classes still have to think carefully before buying books. Since being read to does not require a possession of books and can be done in groups, people could have more access to texts. Reading should not be confined as just an activity for individuals. It rather should be a shared experience which allows people to help one another. Experienced readers could help beginners to achieve the same goal for the sake of society as a whole.

## Conclusion

In summary, there is a high possibility that listening could be used to reduce the reading problems in Thailand because the two skills are closely interrelated and can effect each other according to several scientific studies. From the beginning, Thai reading culture has been relying on oral literature, . There is still an evident fondness for being read to, despite Thailand's westernised through European printing culture. Researchers should understand that Thais can improve their reading levels by using listening as a connecting point between the two skills, using listening to spark an interest in books and by attending public readings. Though these methods may seem untraditional, they could possibly be the solution for Thailand's reading crisis. ■

## Notes

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