

Teacher education reform in Thailand: A semiotic analysis of pre-service English teachers' perceptions

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Abstract

The teacher education program in Thailand has undergone various reforms, with the latest being the shortening of the teacher education curriculum from five years to four. To date, very few studies have accounted for this reform. To address this gap, our study sought to analyse pre-service English teachers' perceptions towards the reform. This was done through a semiotic analysis of visuals contributed by the pre-service teachers. There were a total of 43 visual contributions, which were analysed through Labbo's typology of symbolisms and attributes discerned from the visuals and their corresponding captions. We were able to categorize the visuals to three types of symbolisms, which were transformative, typographic, and the third type being a combination of the first and second. The most common attribute was positive affect (emotion), with a few visuals rationalizing or questioning the reform. The analysis revealed that the pre-service teachers did not really understand the nature of the reform, despite their positive perception towards change.

Keywords: Pre-service teachers, semiotic analysis, teacher education reform

Introduction

The teacher education program in Thailand has undergone several reforms in the past century (Thongthew, 2014). A few years ago, another reform was implemented, where the teacher education program was shortened from five years to just four. Despite being implemented, very few studies have examined the impact of this reform, including the perception of pre-service teachers (PSTs) affected by it. Furthermore, other studies have reported that perceptions towards reform, particularly those held by teachers PSTs, are typically taken for

granted as these reforms are driven primarily by agenda or demands at the national level (e.g., Somekh & Ahmad, 2011).

Generally, reform in the education sector has been examined through teachers' perceptions (e.g. Yan & Brown, 2021). Pre-service teachers' perceptions can be studied through quantitative (e.g. surveys, Kim, 2019) and qualitative (e.g. semi-structured interview, Merisi & Pillay, 2020; Kanchai, 2019) means. While these approaches offer insights into PSTs' perceptions, they may not embrace other forms of meanings found in teachers' surroundings. These meanings may be derived from different social or material entities that affect a teacher's epistemology (e.g., Fenwick, 2014; Pischetola, Miranda, & Albuguergue, 2021). One potentially useful approach to explore meaning is through semiotic analysis, which places the emphasis on the purposeful selection of a meaningful unit in light of its context of occurrence (Ryan, 2011). With this in mind, our research aims to use semiotic analysis to examine Thai pre-service English teachers' perceptions towards reform affecting the teacher education program. In this study, pre-service English teachers will contribute visuals along with captions to illustrate their perceptions towards the reform, which we will then analyse with Labbo's (1996) typology of symbolism.

Teacher education in Thailand

In Thailand, teacher education programs are offered by *Rajabhat* (teacher training) universities. Besides the *Rajabaths*, prospective teachers may also enroll in any accredited teacher education programs offered by other conventional universities, of which there are more than 100 to choose from. According to the teacher education curriculum offered by *Rajabhat* universities, PSTs have to complete four types of courses. First, they need to take at least 30 credits of general education courses, which serve as the foundation of the undergraduate degree. Second, 34 credits of the teaching-related courses focusing on pedagogy and assessment need to be completed. There are also 12 credits worth of internship and practicum which student-teachers need to complete. During their internship or practicum, PSTs will get to apply methodologies they learned in an authentic setting. Third, student-teachers have to study 78 credits of their major subjects, consisting of a group of core classes determined by their degree program. The last type of courses include 6 credits of elective subjects, where student-teachers will have an opportunity to explore other subjects they are interested in (see also Phairee et al., 2008; Siribanpitak, 2018).

All teacher education programs operate with a curriculum that is approved and managed by the Teacher Council of Thailand (Jamjuree, 2017). In tandem with the changes observed in the education sector, the teacher education program has also undergone various reforms since its formalization in the early 1900s (Thongthew, 2014). Up until a few years ago, teacher programs offered by the *Rajabhats* had a five-year curriculum, with the fifth year culminating in a 1-year practicum placement, where pre-service teachers will teach and do other related administrative work expected at school. However, a reform that was first reported in 2017 saw the shortening of the curriculum to only four years. The shortening of the program was touted as a solution for the lack of teachers in public schools across the nation (Chailom, 2019). Besides the shortening of study years, another change brought about by this reform is that PSTs will now need to pass teaching exams to be able to work in the public school system. This presents a concern, as incoming teachers are no longer assessed based on their actual ability to teach, observable through their teaching practicum, but on satisfactory exam results (see Watson Todd & Darasawang, 2020).

English teaching in Thailand: Motivations and perceptions

The perceptions held by a teacher, including those who are completing their pre-service education, are formed by their motivation. The notion of motivation has been accepted as being multidimensional, which may comprise of motives for being a teacher, commitment to education, and the sense of self-efficacy (Ezer, Gilat, & Sagee, 2010). In terms of motivation to be future teachers, studies about PSTs in Thailand have reported that the decision might not necessarily be that of the PSTs'. Rather, decisions may be influenced by the expectations of the family, or to simply obtain a higher education degree. In fact, it was reported that there are actually very few who were genuinely keen on being an English teacher (Prabjandee, 2020a). This may be due to the PSTs' socio-historical background. As reported by Sudtho and Singhasiri (2017), pre-service English teachers were found to have established core beliefs regarding teaching even before enrolling into a teacher education program. These beliefs may be what they have observed in their own language learning experience, or from the expectations of their social or family circle. Thereafter, these experiences may shape a teacher's motive to be in the profession of education. Other types of motivation may include the desire to improve the quality of English education, interest in helping students along the language learning path, and play a part in shaping the person they aspire to become, especially in terms of being financially stable as working as a teacher for the Thai public school system promises pension after retirement.

Closely linked to PSTs' motivation to become teachers is their perception towards the teaching profession. When examining perception, a teacher may pose the question – “What do I think of this?” (see Hanna, Oostdam, Severiens, & Zijlstra, 2019). Such questions are important for examining perceptions that teachers may hold, as it reveals an extent of their personal knowledge (Beijaar, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). It is important to note, however, that PSTs' motivation may appear contradictory to the perceptions held. This may be seen in the study of Prabjandee, (2020a), where the presence of multifaceted motivation may not necessarily align with the perceptions held. As an example, just because a PST's motivation to be a teacher is instrumental, it does not mean that the teacher will also hold a negative perception towards teaching. Instead, the PST will still take genuine efforts to ensure that his or her teaching is of value to the students. In the literature concerning English PSTs in Thailand, we can observe this phenomenon. For instance, some recent studies about the perceptions of Thai PSTs of English concern the integration of information, computer and technology into the teacher education program. Studies have indicated a positive disposition towards technology held by PSTs, even though their motivation might be multifaceted. Thai pre-service English teachers can be quite resourceful, as reported by Jantori (2020). In her study, pre-service English teachers were found to enact different strategies to in their learning to become English teachers. In line with the teacher education program, studies have also examined PSTs' perceptions towards their internship or practicum experience. In general, the perception has been positive, as the practicum site is considered valuable for teacher identity development (Prabjandee, 2020b). For instance, through the teaching practicum, English PSTs are presented with numerous opportunities where their beliefs or practices may be affirmed or challenged (Sudtho, Singhasiri, & Jimarkon Zilli, 2015). The teaching practicum is also perceived as a valuable opportunity for pre-service English teachers to recalibrate self-perceptions with actual practices in the classroom. It is also through the practicum where pre-service English teachers will be able to identify misalignments between the teacher education curriculum with incidents in an actual classroom (Loo, Maimom, & Kitjaroonchai, 2019).

These positive perceptions reported by studies are also indicative of the significance that emotions have on PSTs, as well as on in-service teachers. In recent years, teacher emotion has come to the forefront as an integral variable that shapes teacher identity. In terms of

English teacher emotion, studies have reported that emotions are congruent with perception and motivation (e.g., Tran, Burns, & Ollerhead, 2017). Teacher emotions are natural responses towards the presence of variables that are either positively or negatively congruent with their perceptions (Golombek & Doran, 2014). For instance, if a teacher encounters variables that impede professional goals that are perceived as significant, negative emotions will be experienced. Nonetheless, even if there are impediments in achieving these goals, a motivated teacher – who is self-efficacious – will enact strategies in order to persevere (see Tran, Burns, & Ollerhead, 2017). The consideration of teacher emotions, especially those whose first language is not English, yet teach English, is pivotal as it demonstrates how these teachers are capable of overcoming challenges that may not affect teachers whose first language is English, or those who teach in an English-speaking context (Wolff & De Costa, 2017). It is also important to note that emotions should not be viewed in isolation. As stated by Song (2018), emotions should be viewed “as something that is constituted, shaped, and circulated within social, historical, political, and economic contexts” (p. 463).

In this section, we had highlighted some studies regarding PSTs' perceptions, which have been mostly positive. This points towards PSTs who seem to be motivated to be in the teaching profession, which aligns with the local cultural view regarding teachers (see Fry, 2018). Nonetheless, while these studies provide insights about the teacher education program in Thailand, our understanding of how the recent reform is perceived remains limited. So far, only one study by Chailom (2019) indicated that PSTs held an ambivalent perception towards the reform, that is, the five-year curriculum was favored due to it offering more learning opportunities; nonetheless, a longer program also meant more incurred costs. Another issue that affects these student-teachers is that up until 2021, the four-year programs offered by most Rajabhat universities have actually not received any official approval by the Teachers Council of Thailand, even though student-teachers are already in their senior year of their studies. This issue has become a great concern since the students might encounter difficulties in taking the national teacher exam if their curriculum is still not approved in time. Meanwhile, there are still ongoing requests for the Ministry of Higher Education Science Research and Innovation (MHESI), as well as the Teachers Council of Thailand to urgently consider granting the approval needed for the four-year curriculum. Hence, to address the scarcity of studies and to highlight the predicament that is affecting student-teachers, this study aims to explore the perceptions held by PSTs regarding the teacher education reform through the use of semiotic analysis.

The study

Examining perceptions through semiotic analysis

Theoretically speaking, semiotic analysis is grounded in the belief that meaning can be found and analyzed in networks of materials. As such, meaning is not privileged to conventional means, that is, the use of language; instead, meaning may be attributed through various discursive practices or indexicality made evident symbolically through the use of relevant materials that are mutually understood within its immediate context (Keane, 2003). Simply put, the study or analysis of semiotics is “a theory of signs (visual, as well as verbal) and how they are interpreted” (Moriarty, 2002, p. 27). A semiotic approach in gaining an understanding of social phenomenon in particular settings, thus, would entail a recognition that the social ecologies are meaningfully created by a host of materials, without relying solely on language use. Keane (2003) argues that this minimizes or even diminishes the totality of language as a precursor for understanding.

In the broader field of education, semiotics have been utilized to understand the process of learning. For example, Knain, Fredlund, and Furberg (2021) explored young students' retention of interest and understanding towards a particular science topic in a lesson. Specifically, through the semiotic analysis of students' drawings, their study found that students were able to move from concrete to abstract concepts as the lesson progressed. In the study of teachers, semiotic analysis has been used to examine meaning-making through teachers' use of gestures, prosody and proxemics, together with what was uttered during a lesson (Moro, Mortimer, & Tiberghien, 2020), or the study of feedback in academic writing by looking at the relationship between the voice of the feedback provider, the visual (computer screen) and other textual elements (Tyrer, 2021). In semiotic analysis, there is an interest in how beliefs or behaviours are represented in distinct ways. This analytical form also challenges the notion that the world may be told through a singular objective truth (Lemke, 1987). Specifically, semiotic analysis expands the notion of meaning-making, from inherently logographic means to the experiences and senses derived by the social surroundings. As stated by van Lier (2008, p. 599), "[t]he surrounding world plays a constitutive part as well, including the physical world of objects and spatio-temporal relationships, the social world of other meaning-making and meaning-sharing persons, the symbolic world of thoughts, feelings, cultural practices, values, and so on..." Thus, through semiotic analysis, there is a breaking down of 'artificial boundaries' created to segregate the mental and the material, which constricts the interaction between social, material, and abstract entities (Lemke, 1998). What semiotics analysis offers is the opportunity to consider other meaningful signifiers present within an ecology (van Lier, 1997).

Context and data collection

This study was carried out with a group of PSTs of English at Sisaket Rajabhat University, a teacher education institution located in the northeastern region of Thailand. The Faculty of Education at this university has been established for nearly 10 years to serve the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC) and local education. The pre-service English teachers in this study were currently enrolled in the teacher education program, and they were all taught by the primary researcher of this study. Their English proficiency ranged from lower intermediate to the intermediate level, so they could express their feelings accurately by using English. All of them knew of the latest teacher educational reform, and they also knew that their program was not a part of the reform – a shorter program of four years. As such, these participants occupied a temporal space that is unique. Hence, their perceptions, emotions and suggestions about the reform may be significant, given that their journey to becoming teachers would differ from those in other teacher education programs.

The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, where an open invitation was directed to all of the primary researcher's PSTs to complete an online open-ended survey. The data utilized in our current study is part of a larger set of data of quantitative and qualitative form. For this study, the PSTs were invited to select and submit a visual of any kind, accompanied by a caption (with no word limit), that illustrated their perceptions towards the reform, which was the shortening of the teacher education program from five years to four. This data collection method is similar to that of Weninger and Kiss (2013).

Analytical tool

As discussed, the use of visuals can be a meaningful symbol to represent perceptions towards a phenomenon. In the broad area of education, semiotic analysis has been used to examine content and illustrations in teaching materials (e.g., Weninger & Kiss, 2013) and also used as

the basis to explore changes experienced by PSTs' in their conceptualization of teaching and learning (e.g., Accurso. 2020). In our study, visuals are analysed based on the typology of symbolism proposed by Labbo (1996). Labbo had proposed three types of symbolism from which meaning can be derived, which are descriptive, transformative, and typographic symbolism (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of semiotic symbolism (Labbo, 1996)

Descriptive Symbolism	Transformative Symbolism	Typographic Symbolism
<i>The use of graphic images to represent meaning</i>	<i>The use of graphic images to represent another graphic symbol</i>	<i>The use of letters (or characters) to represent speech that symbolizes meaning</i>
<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Referential symbolism – labeling a picture with a real world referent ▪ Conceptual symbolism – labeling a symbol as part of a conceptual class of objects ▪ Functional symbolism – labeling a symbol in culturally identifiable ways ▪ Constructive symbolism – using a collection of symbols to make a complex object 	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Transfigurative symbolism – using a symbol as a substitute for another object ▪ Graphically abstract symbolism – using special effects, geometric shapes, or combinations of lines to graphically represent meaning ▪ Dramatic symbolism – creation of a make-believe world 	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Scribbles ▪ Keyboard characters ▪ Copied words ▪ Phonemic clusters ▪ Conventional spelling

The analytical process began with the categorization of visuals that the pre-service English teachers uploaded, along with the corresponding captions. This was done according to the types of symbolism presented in Table 1. Next, within each of the three major categories, the researchers further categorized the visuals according to attributes and meaning discernible through the participants' uploaded visuals and captions. These attributes include “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). These attributes may be compared to Golombek and Doran's (2014) notion of index, that is, a message that is discernible through a cognitive understanding. Thus, by focusing on attributes, the analysis of the PSTs' perceptions was done constructively, as meaning was derived based on what is understood in the visuals and their corresponding captions, along with the larger social phenomenon affecting the participants, which is the teacher education reform (e.g. Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, Jimarkon Zilli, 2017). Furthermore, since the primary researcher is from the same context of the participants, and both researchers have experiences in teacher education, including in the context of Thailand, it was possible to ensure an extent of congruity in understanding the perceptions held by the participants.

Findings

There were forty-three PSTs of English who responded to the open invitation to share a visual and caption representing their perceptions towards the reform. All but one of the visuals had accompanying captions. The one visual that did not have a caption was not discarded, since the visual was sufficient in producing semiotic meaning that can be discerned. Data could be

organized into two of Labbo’s (1996) symbolism categories presented in Table 1, which were Transformative and Typographic. There were no semiotic data that could be categorized as descriptive, as none of the participants provided visuals that represented their realities to symbolize their perceptions. There was, however, an introduction of another category, which was the combination of Transformative and Typographic. This new category was introduced as there were some visuals which had words in them, such as ‘memes’, which is a common form of semiotic communication that combines both visual and language elements, prevalent in today’s digital discourse (see Yus, 2019).

Under the three symbolism categories, there are further attributes to distinguish the visual and caption data (Table 2). Broadly speaking, the data was attributed as being affective, which signified a representation of an emotion (either positive or negative) towards the reform. Another attribute is logical, where the visual and caption provided by the participants demonstrated thinking through rationalizing or questioning the reform. As seen in Table 2, most of the participants (n=23) used transformative symbolism to represent their perceptions towards the teacher education reform. This was accomplished by using a picture that contained meaningful elements which the participants used to symbolize their perceptions. The next frequent type of symbolism was the dramatic form (n=8), which in our study, refers to cartoons or illustrations. These visuals were considered dramatic as the images illustrated extraordinary representations of people or other common objects. The least used symbolism was the graphically abstract and the use of words, where each had one contribution.

Table 2. Categorization of visuals and attributes

		<i>Symbolism</i>							
		Transformative			Typographic		Transformative + Typographic		
<i>Attribute</i>		TR	GA	DR	KC	W	TR	DR	W
<i>Affective</i>	Positive	10		1	2			1	
	Negative	5		2					1
<i>Logical</i>	Rationalizing	8	1	4		1			1
	Questioning			1			2	1	2
<i>TOTAL (43)</i>		23	1	8	2	1	2	2	4

Legend: TR: Transfigurative; GA: Graphically Abstract; DR: Dramatic; KC: Keyboard Characters; W: Words

In the following sections, we discuss the three broad categories: transformative, typographic and transformative + typographic symbolisms. In each part, we will illustrate and discuss the different attributes through a selection of semiotic data, given the restrictions on space.

Transformative symbolism

Transformative symbolism is the use of a visual as a substitute for another object or phenomenon (Labbo, 1996). This is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, where pictures are used to convey meaning. Figure 3 exemplifies dramatic symbolism, due to it illustrating a make-believe world (images emanating from a book).



The reason for choosing this picture is because when changing the reform, it may lead to a higher unemployment rate for the teaching profession at that time. Which may affect many professional careers and may affect the quality of teaching and learning in the future.

Figure 1. Transfigurative visual symbolizing negative affect

Figure 1 showcases an image of people looking dejected. In the corresponding caption, the contributor of this visual noted that the reform was perceived negatively, as it may impact the job security of teachers, as well as the quality of teaching and learning. Within the context of Thailand, this does not come as a surprise, as there have been other critical studies which have pointed out challenges brought up in the larger education sector, such as the wholesale adaptation of international curricula without contextualization to the local needs (Lao, 2019) or even the lack of any clear planning for how a reform should be carried out (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013), as well as the need for PSTs to pass tests in order to be able to work in the public education system (Watson Todd & Darasawang, 2020). These issues certainly place teachers', including PSTs', job security in a state of vulnerability, which has also been observed in other contexts where reform has diminished teachers' agency and resulted in the delegitimization and deprofessionalization of the teaching profession (de Saxe, Bucknovitz, & Mahoney-Mosedale, 2020).



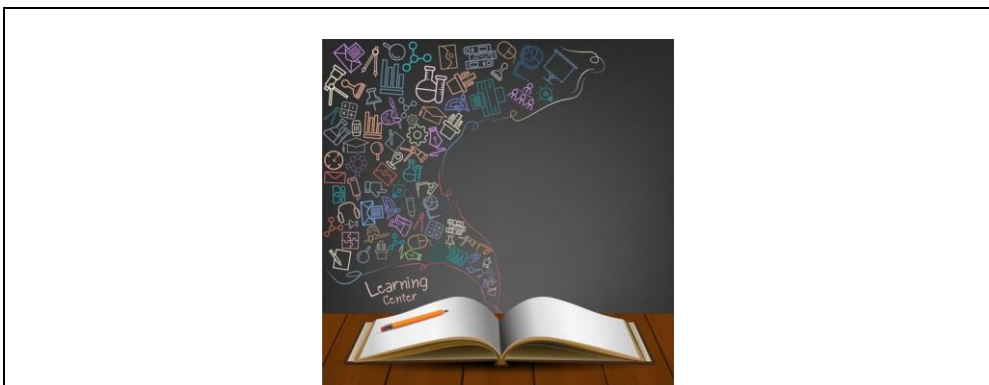
I choose this picture because I think the reform of education system can help the pre-service teachers to improve and prepare themselves to be the good teacher in 21st century. Maybe it will make the pre-service teacher to be good at the creative teaching, problem solving or management in classroom better than the past. For this reason, I feel it is very useful to

modify syllabus which is maybe respond with the needs of learners and it's also respond to the needs of standards. As this picture, it shows we have the different ideas, thoughts, aptitudes and so on. The reform will guide and make them know the strengthen and weakness of oneself and then they will know how to continual learning to achieve their goals. They will learn with the passion and motivation as many color chalks in the block. Although we have to teach follow the standards but we will adapt teaching styles to be more interesting. We will be the teacher as color which means we will work with the passions and joyfulness and we will not be a white chalk as in the past which focus to teach students on passive learning. In conclusion, the reform can support the pre-service teachers for improving themselves which is appropriate with the teacher in 21st century.

Figure 2. Transfigurative visual symbolizing positive affect

In contrast to Figure 1, Figure 2 presents a more optimistic outlook. While the visual of chalks that was chosen does not necessarily show the positive emotions of the contributor, the caption discussed how the reform may be helpful for teachers to be better equipped for the 21st century classroom. This contributor also noted that the reform will consolidate the differences in perspectives for the better, symbolized through the different colored chalks, instead of the chalks being only white. Moreover, the contributor of Figure 2 states that even with changes affecting the teacher education program, it really is the job of the PSTs to ensure that they are well equipped to work. This demonstrates an extent of self-efficacy, which situates the PSTs as keen on further professional development. Nonetheless, as can be seen in the caption of Figure 2, the aspect that needs strengthening was not clearly identified, as reported in the study by Hoang and Wyatt (2021), who reported that pre-service English teachers in Vietnam did not look at specific dimensions of language pedagogy that needed improvement; instead, they focused on their general pedagogical abilities.

Besides symbolizing the affect of the participants, there were also visuals that symbolized rationalizing the reform, such as that seen in Figure 3. While the caption may be full of affect (optimism and hope), the primary meaning being conveyed here is that change is inevitable as time moves on. What this contributor considered significant is that teachers will need to ensure that students learn, in spite of the changes that take place. In a way, this signifies the moral obligation that teachers have towards their students, in that learning needs to take place. Yet, when considered critically, it becomes apparent that the contributor is talking in general terms, such as that discussed previously. This may perhaps stem from the lack of any clear plan on the part of the current teacher education program, or the upcoming reform, in clearly articulating to the PSTs what their roles might be as an English teacher (see discussion by Hallinger & Bryant, 2013; Watson Todd & Darasawang, 2020).



The new century of learning, students should be center, teacher as a coach.
Teachers should bring the real personality of any kids.
Books are just a part of learning but the important thing is real life being.
Let's the kids be what their wanted, help them find themselves.
Respect and believe in want the kids.
I think, the important things which many people forget is to teach them "how to love themselves."
When people know how to love themselves, they will be good enough for themselves. believe in themselves, trust and always respect in themselves. So, I hope I will see the new world full fill by the new ideas and the way to be one own-self.
From the picture: one side is knowledge, we will get from school, and the other side is the empty page of life, that every kid should have the chance to color, and write down their own diary with no judgement

Figure 3. Dramatic visual symbolizing logical rationale

Typographic symbolism

In this next part, we present a sample of typographic symbolism, which, according to Labbo (1996), signifies meaning through the use of texts or keyboard characters. In our study, we have expanded the use of keyboard characters to include common 'emojis' found in mobile devices, such as that seen in Figure 4.

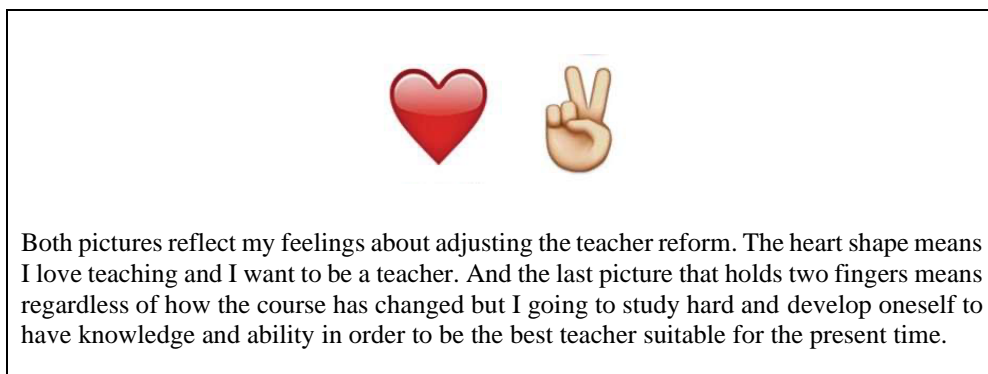


Figure 4. Keyboard characters symbolizing positive affect

The semiotic meaning from Figure 4 is that of optimism. From the caption, it can be understood that the contributor values teaching and being a teaching. In spite of the changes observed in the education reform, the contributor stated that he/she is willing to work hard to be the 'best teacher' in the current situation. This is similar to Figure 2 and 3, where there is a sense of self-efficacy and a moral obligation to do well in the teaching profession. In Figure 5, semiotic meaning may be derived from the choice of statement (words), which said "new concept (sic) always lead to new things". The contributor pointed out that doing something the same way may lead to unsatisfactory results, perhaps due to the process becoming routinized. This may be reflective of the larger issue affecting Thai education, which has been criticized for diminishing creativity, as many subjects in school like math, science, and English require structured right or wrong answers (e.g., Ladachart, 2021). Hence, a reform that leads to more innovative ways of teaching might be viewed favourably. Nonetheless,

while changes may be good, we have reported that, so far, educational changes that have been proposed and carried out in the context of Thailand has not been received positively.



Figure 5. Words symbolizing logical rationale

Transformative + typographic symbolism

In this part, we illustrate two samples of the combination of transformative and typographic symbolism. One may be considered a meme (Figure 6) and the other a combination of words (in Thai) and picture (Figure 7). In two of these examples, captions were also provided.

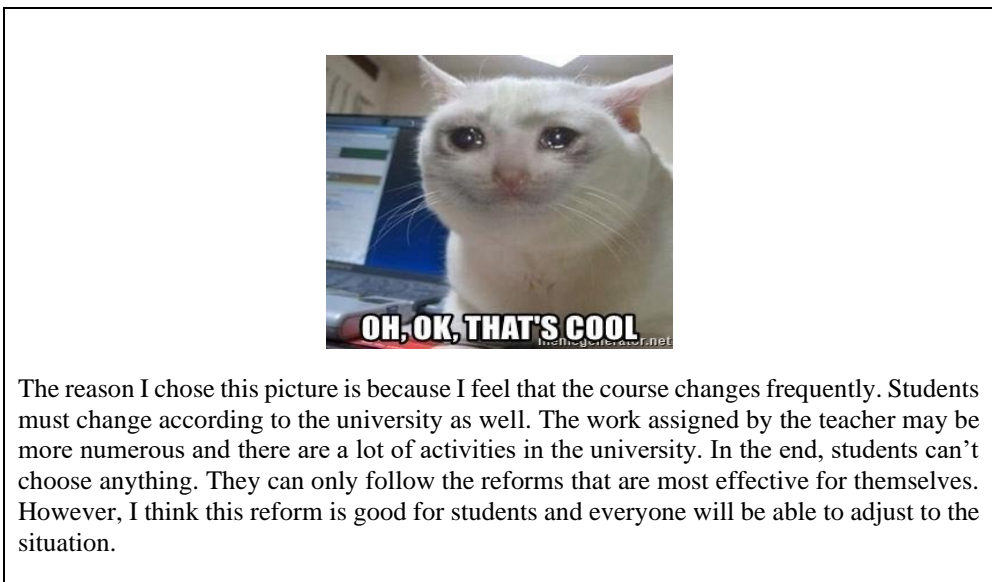


Figure 6. Transfigurative visual and words symbolizing negative affect

There is a sense of resignation that changes are inevitable illustrated in Figure 6. This is semiotically signified through the choice of the crying cat and the words “Oh, ok. That’s cool”. Pre-service or even those who are in-service are faced with such dilemmas, where on the one hand they may have reservations towards changes, yet on the other, they are not empowered to respond. Teachers’ reticence may stem from a mismatch between policy and the teaching context (e.g., Prabjandee, 2019), or even the uncertainty or unfamiliarity of a novel pedagogical requirement (e.g., Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, Jimarkon Zilli, 2017). As we can see from this figure, allowing students to express their feelings about the reform by using photos or meme can be useful in detecting students’ opinions through semiotic analysis. According to Thai culture, the younger generation might not directly express negative (or any other) emotions towards decisions decided by older people or those in power (see ‘Thainess’, Farrelly, 2016). As a result, it is not common (and even unacceptable) for them to write or directly tell authoritative people how they feel; nonetheless, this figure clearly shows the negativity felt towards the teacher education reform.

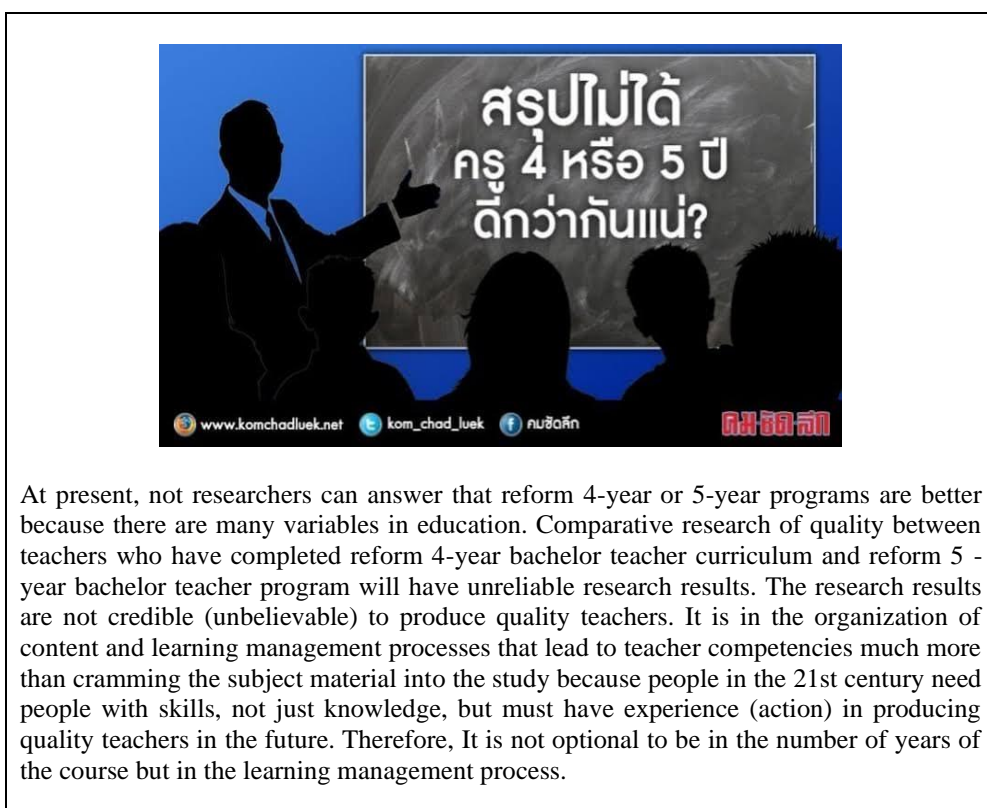


Figure 7. Transfigurative visual and words symbolizing logical questioning

The Thai script in Figure 7 can be understood as there is no judgement whether the 5 year or 4 year program is better. This illustrates a critical evaluation of the reform, stating that the shortening of the program would not have any significant bearing on the quality of teachers; instead, it is the management and organization of the teacher education program that will determine whether teachers will be sufficiently equipped to teach. The semiotic meaning here resonates with the issues brought up by Lao (2019), where education in Thailand has been fraught with superficial changes that do not lead to any meaningful or impactful outcomes.

This has been a persistent problem affecting Thai education at large, where “goals and intentions into meaningful actions by principals and teachers in the provinces have been characterized by slippage, misinterpretation and variable success” (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013, p. 408).

Discussion

In our study, semiotic meanings gleaned through visual and typographical symbolisms illustrated the perceptions of the pre-service English teachers regarding the teacher education reform. In summary, the findings indicate that most PSTs perceived the reform in an affective manner, while some others perceived it by questioning or rationalizing the reform. In terms of affect, or emotions, most of the PSTs were positive. These were observed among those who held the perception that teachers are responsible to act accordingly to changes in the education setting (Figure 2), and that teaching may involve hard work (Figure 4). Positive emotions were also held due to the belief that change is inevitable (Figure 3), and that reform may be something good as it disrupts conventional approaches in education (Figure 5). Amidst these positive emotions, there were also those that were negative, such as that seen in Figure 1 and 6, where there was the feeling of dejection and the desire to understand the necessity of the reform.

While the perceptions of the PSTs were largely positive, it was apparent that they did not have a clear conceptualization of the reform, seen through general statements, such as ‘being a good teacher’, ‘doing the best for the students’, or ‘using 21st century methods’ – none of which articulates specific aspects of English language teaching, as observed in Hoang and Wyatt’s (2021) study. A reason for this vagueness may be the lack of clarity on how the reform might affect the quality of teaching, since the PSTs might not be certain about how the new curriculum is structured differently from what their current program. The only obvious difference to them was perhaps the reduced number of years. This lack of clarity may stem from several issues at the leadership level and beyond. First, it has been reported that education leaders typically function only as the face of the government institution, without carrying measures to initiate or support impactful changes. Thus, in the broader educational policy reforms in Thailand, change has been considered a stable or static isolated event, instead of a continuous process, which has resulted in “incomplete strategies, distorted time frames for assessing success and a lack of commitment to persist over the long term.” (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013, p. 415). Second, beyond the educational leaders, Thailand has also seen various ministers in recent years, with each of them having different ideas about how Thai education should be directed. Since 1999, Thailand has had eight governments and 21 education ministers, each of whom had about six months and 16 days to work (The Nation Thailand, 2017). Hence, even with the recent teacher education reform, there is no certainty as to how long that change will last, or how well the change will be implemented. Third, the preparation of English teachers may not be considered an immediate priority of the government, since the larger market of English education remains saturated by foreign English teachers and international (English) curricula (Watson Todd & Darasawang, 2020). Due to these challenges, it comes as no surprise that despite introducing new reforms or policies meant to improve English language teaching, the deficient model still prevails, that is, the focus on accurate language form and on passing national-level assessments (Watson Todd & Darasawang, 2020). This leads to students being positioned only as learning about the language instead of learning how to use the language effectively (Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, Jimarkon Zilli, 2019). Thus, in lieu of these challenges, it is perhaps to the interest of the

English PSTs in Thailand be committed to the teaching profession and to teach from the heart, as top-level policies have not been sufficient in providing any clear directions for them.

Concluding remarks

It is true that change affecting the education sector is inevitable, such as that documented by Thongthew (2014). Nonetheless, the reasons for many of these changes may not be clearly articulated or understood, as seen through the perceptions of the PSTs in our study, as well as others' published reports (e.g., Hallinger & Bryant, 2013; Lao, 2019). While the ambiguity of change may pose as a challenge to the implementation of the teacher education program reform in Thailand, this study was able to clarify some of the perceptions held by the PSTs, which may be helpful to elucidate strategies to cope with the current and future reforms. Specifically, we recommend that teacher educators leverage on PSTs' positive disposition towards reform in as a coping mechanism to ensure that they stay on track with their study program. From a management perspective, findings from this study position the concept of change as integral in education. Around the world, we have observed changes in the national curricula, as well as in the teaching methods or equipment. As such, the notion of change in education should be integrated into the teacher education journey, so as to prepare future teachers for the dynamic nature of teaching and schooling, and for them not to be caught off guard when changes do occur (Zhu & Fang, 2011). Doing this will also ensure that teachers are invested in professional growth, as they look towards making changes for positive outcomes.

In terms of research implications, the process of clarifying PSTs' perceptions through the use of semiotic analysis provides another research methodology which others can consider. Typically, studies on PSTs' perception have utilized surveys (e.g., Hoang & Wyatt, 2021) or narrative inquiry – which is a common tool in the Thai context (e.g., Kanchai, 2019; Ladachart, 2021; Prabjandee, 2020b). Our study, on the other hand, offers a novel method, as it takes into account the sociocultural, or semiotic meanings found in the PSTs' surroundings through visuals that may be attributable to a form of qualitative data. This approach also takes into account the subjectivities of the researchers, as well as relevant literature, to establish cognitive congruence for an understanding that reflects suitably the complexity of PSTs' journeys on becoming teachers.

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