

Failure Is Most Definitely An Option!

By Sawadee2000



Believe it or not, Marie Antoinette never actually said "Let them eat cake". The attribution of that quote to her is so ingrained in most people's minds though that they continue to believe it nonetheless. For historical accuracy I will set the record straight. What Marie *did* say on being told that the peasants had no bread, was, "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche", or "Let them eat brioche". I actually think that shows more contempt... and no one knows how to show contempt better than the French!

If I were to poll everyone reading this piece about the quote "Failure is not an option", most everyone would say, "Oh yeah, that NASA guy in Apollo 13 said that". "That guy", whose name is Gene Kranz, was the flight director during the Apollo 13 mission. Unfortunately, although that line sounded great in the Ron Howard movie, Mr. Kranz never said any such thing. So powerful is Hollywood magic, that until about 15 minutes ago when I looked up that supposed quote that I believed it was accurate. It just goes to show that Old Sawadee is just as gullible as the general public when it comes

to believing a whole lot of supposed facts.

Well regardless of what Mr. Kranz did or didn't say, I am here today to tell you about an instance where failure is most definitely an option.

Just over a week ago I had the "privilege" of taking the four so-called Professional Knowledge Tests given by Khurusapah, The Teachers Council of Thailand. After a mentally exhausting two-day experience, I can conclusively say that not only is failure an option where these tests are concerned, it is an inevitable certainty. I can't remember any time in recent memory when I was made to feel more stupid than I did taking these foolish things.

Gone are the days when any idiot with a backpack who just *happens* to speak English can become an English teacher here in Thailand. I certainly applaud the idea that being a teacher requires more than the mere ability to speak one's own language. As someone who holds a degree in Education, I believe that English teachers should meet recognized professional standards regarding their qualifications. That being said, it is too bad that The Teacher's Council of Thailand doesn't have the faintest idea what constitutes professional standards.

What exactly were these tests purportedly all about? Let me start with Khurusaph's explanation of the purpose of the Professional Teaching Knowledge Test for Foreign Teachers.

"The teaching profession is an educational licensed Profession under the Teachers and Educational Personnel Council Act B.E. 2546

(2003). According to this Act, Section 9 (8), the Teachers Council of Thailand (TCT) shall have powers and duties to certify professional knowledge and experience, including expertise in practice of the profession. As provided by the law, Section 48, persons who practice the licensed profession shall conduct themselves following the professional standards and ethics.

Professional standards consist of professional knowledge and experience prescribed by the Teachers Council of Thailand Board. The Qualifications for those who practice the profession must hold at least a degree in Education or its equivalent or other related fields accredited by the TCT. Based on the above criteria, the teachers shall have 9 areas of necessary knowledge as follows:

- 1. Language and Technology for Teachers*
- 2. Curriculum Development*
- 3. Learning Management*
- 4. Psychology for Teachers*
- 5. Educational Measurement and Evaluation*
- 6. Classroom Management*
- 7. Educational Research*
- 8. Educational Innovation and Information Technology*
- 9. Teacher Professionalism*

Therefore those who do not meet the qualification criteria, the test is an alternative way to assist foreign teachers to qualify for the teaching license.

The main objective of the test is to equip the applicants for teaching licenses to meet the expected professional standards."

Now technically I shouldn't have had to take these tests at all, because my BA is in Education. Unfortunately I received my degree back in 1972 and don't have a current teaching license from the U.S. This meant that I had to take these tests, which are offered several times a year at a few locations around Thailand. Fortunately I was able to take them up in Chiang Mai, which is only an hour from Lampang.

So, bright and early on a sunny Friday morning I showed up to Chiang Mai Vocational College, along with four other teachers from my school. None of us had any idea what to expect. The only thing we knew for certain was that very few foreign teachers in Thailand had ever passed a *single one* of the four tests we were about to take. Therefore it was with a sense of fatalism that I sat down in my assigned seat to begin test number one. From what we had all heard test number one was "the easy test". Well, that's an encouraging note. This test dealt with "Language and Technology for Teachers and Educational Innovation and Information Technology". Well how hard could anything having to do with the English language possibly be? Unfortunately before I could even begin to answer any of the 150 questions in front of me, I first needed to "decode" what was written in my exam book. I am not being disingenuous when I say that whoever wrote this test has no business to question *anyone's* competency in English.

Did anyone of you catch the error in this sentence? "*Therefore those who do not meet the qualification criteria, test is an alternative way to assist foreign teachers to qualify for the teaching license.*"

Obviously the sentence should have said,
“**For** those who do not meet the qualification
criteria, **this** test is an alternative way to
qualify for **a** teaching license.

Even though that sentence was incorrectly
written, you still could easily understand
what it meant. It does illustrate though that
Khurusaph never bothered to have anyone
proofread what they put out on their website
for the world to see.

The wording of the test questions was so
poor that every native speaking teacher in
the room had to puzzle out just what was
being said...and just as importantly, what
was being asked. It was as though the
person (or persons) writing the test simply
flipped through a dictionary in an attempt to
translate what they had written in Thai into
English. They would have had better luck
using Google Translate!

If I were to attempt to write something in
Thai, the *first* thing I would do would be to
have a native Thai speaker look over my
work. I am not too stinking proud to admit
that just about *any* Thai off the street knows
more than I *ever* will about the Thai
language. Why is it that so many
Thais...especially educated Thais, can never
bring themselves to acknowledge the fact
that native English speakers just *might* know
a bit more about their own language?

I have often thought that I could have a full-
time career simply fixing signs poorly written
in English. I could also have had a second
career correcting the various test
preparation books you find in Thai
bookstores. The poorly written signs are

sometimes amusing. The poorly written test books are not in the least bit funny. A teacher at my former school used to prepare tests for her Mathayom (high school) students based on these books. Fortunately she had the good sense to have me proofread what she prepared. There were so many egregious errors that I swear I wore out a red pen correcting them all.

Many of these test books have been around for years. It's difficult to believe that all that time no one has pointed out all the errors they contain. The test I was taking that morning in Chiang Mai has been around for quite some time. I'm sure many of the teachers taking them have commented on the piss-poor English. So why haven't they been corrected? Well I can think of a plausible scenario. It goes like this.

I wouldn't doubt that the person who wrote these tests is a high ranking member of the Thai Ministry of Education. He (or she) probably holds an advanced degree; perhaps even a PhD. Doctor Somchai probably has a pretty high opinion of himself. He considers himself an expert in the field of education and in the English language. He may have well been on a junket or two to Australia or another western country. He has probably attended all kinds of seminars and written many "prestigious" papers. These papers were probably written in a flowery and obtuse style that throws around technical jargon like flower petals, and makes references to scholarly books. Dr. Somchai has been around for donkey's years, and is considered an expert in the Thai circles he travels in. If you hadn't actually read what he has written you might think that he knows a thing or two. Even a

cursory examination of his work by an educated westerner though would reveal that Dr, Somchai doesn't know his ass from his elbow. If he ever actually taught in a classroom, it hasn't been for many years. His presumed expertise in education and in English is a charade.

Unfortunately, Dr. Somchai is well connected. He is so thoroughly entrenched in the Thai education system that he will remain there until he retires...and even then he will be deferred to by his successor.

When Dr. Somchai writes something, for instance an exam to test the competency of foreign teachers in their own language, no one would dare to correct a single word. The fear of losing face is so great in Thailand that a subordinate would rather allow rubbish to be printed, than to call attention to the fact that perhaps a "few minor corrections" might be called for.

The Great Doctor himself would never consider having anyone check over his work, let alone a Farang. If we have a problem with deciphering the test questions, then obviously we don't understand our own language very well. Hell, after a dozen or so of the questions on this test, I even began to doubt whether I understood the English language! I felt sorry for one poor Chinese teacher who was obviously clueless about all of this. I have no idea why he was required to take tests in English.

Well, despite Dr. Somchai's best attempts to confuse me, I managed to plod my way through the English grammar portion of the test. Unless I was greatly mistaken, I believed that I had answered every one of

them correctly.

Unfortunately I still had to deal with the questions dealing with Technology for Teachers. I will be the first to admit that I am not a savant in the latest electronic marvels. I don't "twitter" nor do I feel the compulsion to get involved in "social networking". On the other hand I am not a complete smurf...especially when it comes to preparing learning material.

I regularly download pictures from the internet, edit them in Photoshop, and print them out to use for my classroom. I know how to create PowerPoint presentations. I know to download songs from YouTube and other on-line media sources and burn them on to CDs and DVDs. I use quite a lot of this in teaching phonics and to supplement other learning material.

None of what I (and other teachers) use technology for in the classroom was reflected in the test questions. Instead there were innumerable questions about such things as the technical specifications of iPads. WTF? Since when did knowing about a f***king iPad become essential to teach English in Thailand? I don't own one. I don't need one.

I know that the powers that be in Thailand are obsessed with the misguided notion that every Thai student must have a tablet. The burning question I would like to pose to them is why? So that they can play *Angry Birds* and chat on *Facebook*? Anyone who has ever spent any time in a Thai classroom knows that nearly all Thai kids use a computer only for playing games and chatting. They sure as hell aren't using them

to learn anything.

I'm sure a few well connected cronies of some high ranking government officials would just love to have a slice or two of the Money Pie that will be used to pay for *this* boondoggle.

The tens of millions of baht that will be wasted on this ill fated high-tech scheme would be far better spent on a much lower tech enterprise...namely putting books into every school's library. Anyone who has looked in a Thai school's library would be shocked to see how few books there are, and most of those are old and outdated. *<Good point, BUT, how many Thai students care to read...whereas they love to play with computers and Ipads etc. - Stick>*

In addition to questions about Ipads, there were bizarre questions about digital photography, such as which scale was used in adjusting color temperature. Although I know hardly anything about the technical aspects digital photography, I did remember that astronomers use the Kelvin scale in analyzing the spectrum of stars. Maybe by sheer luck I selected the correct answer for that particular question. Why though would Doctor Somchai think that knowing this had anything to do with my competency to teach English?

For dozens of other questions I have to admit that I was forced to simply guess, since I had no idea about what was being referred to. I can't imagine that the other foreign teachers taking this test would know any more than I did. We were all in the same boat...the S.S. Thai-tanic, which was inevitably sinking into the abyss.

Eventually I handed in my answer sheet and exam booklet to the two Thai proctors administering this test and staggered off in search of some sustenance to see me through test number two. I wish that I was able to remember more specific examples of test questions, but frankly my mind was utterly numb when I walked out of the classroom. I wasn't alone. Over burgers at Mike's my fellow teachers and I talked about the inanity of what we had just been through, but could only remember fragments of the questions and the choices of answers. It was as though we needed to immediately purge our brains of all this rubbish so that we could begin to think clearly again. We certainly needed every bit of grey matter to face round two.

Test number two was supposedly about Curriculum Development, Learning Management, and Classroom Management. Excuse me for a moment while I roll on the floor while laughing hysterically, because these are three areas with which Thai educators have no working knowledge of. This test was filled with the kind of jargon Thais like to often use as a smoke screen to hide their lack of understanding of what it means to develop and implement a modern curriculum. Once again the questions were barely understandable because of the poor English in which they were written. Once again I did my best to untangle the syntax and figure out what the correct answers were. Even though I know a thing or two about the areas being tested I would be astonished if I passed this test. It was that bad. I have never heard of any foreigner who passed this one. Obviously we are all a bunch of incompetent fools.

By the time I was done with this test my brain felt like a bowl of congealed porridge. Thankfully I had until the next morning to recuperate.

Test number three dealt with Educational Measurement and Evaluation and Educational Research. It was time for yet another dose of jargon and incomprehensible English. As before, none of what was being asked had any relevance to the reality of what teachers do in the classroom. The so-called measurement and questions had nothing to do with grading. The so-called educational research questions were obviously aimed at someone writing a scholarly thesis. Well that rules out 99% of Thai teachers who not that long ago failed to pass a modest test in their own subjects. They certainly aren't destined to be scholars. That also rules out Old Sawadee, who while in his youth could very well indeed have done research in the field of education, but is a bit "long in the tooth" now to do that kind of work.

Thailand might be famous for a few things, but academic research is not one of them. Thais, even educated Thais, rarely read books. You are not very likely to know much of anything outside life in Thailand unless you are well read.

It was a relief to get this test over with. Once again I doubt that I passed it. I needed a long lunch break to steel myself for the last test. Luckily Duke's was within walking distance. There's nothing like a top rate burger and homemade fries to restore your strength!

Test number four...the last test in this quadrathlon from hell was about Psychology for Teachers and Teacher Professionalism. Time for more jargon, and a healthy dose of "isms". It was amusing to see Doctor Somchai attempt to throw terms from B.F. Skinner, Jean Piaget, and Rudolph Steiner around, as if he understood what he was talking about. The only psychology you will ever see employed in a Thai classroom is a big stick. Jean Piaget must have been spinning in his grave to hear his name being invoked. I've tried in vain for years to tell the directors of the schools where I've taught about the stages of cognitive development, and why it is futile to present material that young students are of learning.

The second half of the test dealing with so-called teacher professionalism threw out some strange questions. I remember one which asked which teacher's behavior was moral. Out of the choices given I wonder if it was the teacher who participated in an illegal lottery, but used her profits to buy books for her students.

There a lot of questions that referred to The Teachers and Educational Personnel Council Act B.E. 2546. How in the world anyone who isn't Thai could possibly understand any of this is beyond me. One question wanted to know how large a fine a school would have to pay if it was in violation of some provision of which I was clueless. Another wanted to know how long a prison term someone could receive for doing something or other. There were lots of questions that referred to quotations made in reference to teachers and morality. Others referred to Thais I have never heard of. There was a puzzling question that asked which principle of good

moral behavior would apply to dressing neatly.

I have no problem accepting that a teacher is public figure who is expected to act with a certain degree of public decorum. It doesn't take much brains to know that walking the streets in front of your students and their parents in an intoxicated state while escorting a skimpily dressed bargirl is not acceptable behavior. I still fail to see though why as a foreigner I need to understand the subtleties of Thai quotations I am not familiar with. There were in fact so many questions that you could only answer if you were Thai that I knew I was heading for yet another failure.

I suppose that failure was what these tests were all about. We uppity English speaking foreigners needed to be taken down a peg or two. There's nothing like a gold old-fashioned dose or two of failure to show us that we aren't as smart as we might think we are.

I won't receive the official results of these tests for a while, but I'm not optimistic about my chances of having passed the damned things. Well, there went 4,000 baht down the drain.

What this means for us foreigners receiving teaching licenses is unclear. If the Thai government disqualifies us all from teaching, there won't be a single native English speaker left here. Hmmm, I wonder if that's the general idea. Well so much for Thais ever learning English. If they relied solely on Thais for this, most students would barely be able to say "My name is Somchai".

Okay, before the indignant e-mail starts arriving in my in-box, let me say once again that I am definitely in favor of professional standards for all teachers, including us Farangs teaching English. That being said the tests being given by Khurusapah, are a poor means of evaluating anyone's qualifications to teach. It is ironic that Thais always say that we do not...and never will understand Thai culture, since they have no problem in feigning their understanding of many aspects of western culture, including education. If that were true, why do Thai students rank so poorly on standardized international tests compared to students in China, Japan, Korea and Singapore? Until Doctor Somchai and his cohorts get to the bottom of that conundrum, failure is a word that they will have get used to hearing.



Stickman's thoughts:

These tests are just plain bizarre. For those outside Thailand and / or those with little or no connection to the teaching industry these tests have caused outrage amongst foreigners teaching in the country.

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