

# Developing Communicative Language Teaching at Secondary Schools in Lao PDR - Challenges, Possibilities and Contrasts with Japan.

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on efforts to develop communicative language teaching at a large secondary school near Vientiane in Lao PDR. During March 2011 the author observed lessons taught by trainee English teachers attached to the school for their teaching practicum, working with them to help develop their teaching skills. The paper describes the teaching methodology and materials (text-books) currently used, and explains challenges that Lao teachers face implementing CLT due to limited resources in the school and among the pupils. It includes an overview of English language teacher-training in Laos, comparing this with training in Japan. The final section considers the different challenges involved in introducing communicative language teaching in the public school systems in these two very different East Asian countries.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper looks at English teaching in secondary schools in Laos, taking into account the educational setting, the teaching materials and the training of English teachers. What are the goals of the government and what opportunities does the ability to use English open up for Lao people? Specifically, what attempts are being made to develop communi-

cative language teaching (CLT) and how do these compare to similar efforts by the Japanese government to develop CLT in Japan?

CLT is a language teaching methodology that has grown up since the 1970s, influenced first by Hymes' notion of communicative competence (1972) which was developed into a theory underpinning a new approach to language teaching (Canale and Swaine, 1980). The goal of CLT is successful communication, and assessment is based on the learner's ability to manipulate the L2 appropriately, fluently and effectively. It is not based on their knowledge of grammar rules. The establishment of CLT has led to a shift towards communicative activities (task-based learning) in language classrooms around the world. However, in some Asian countries, CLT is still not the norm, and this is particularly notable in Japan. Many Japanese teachers, especially at upper secondary schools, persist with a grammar-translation approach, usually justified by the need to prepare students for university entrance English. This is despite attempts by the Ministry of Education (MEXT), prompted by concerns in the business community, to promote a communicative approach through the Course of Study for Foreign Languages (MEXT, 2003/2009). CLT is also the method of choice by foreign language educationalists in Laos, but it is also having difficulties in becoming established in secondary schools there largely because of limited educational resources.

For three weeks during March 2011 I participated in a volunteer programme to help Lao English teachers organized by Teachers helping Teachers (THT), a special interest group under the umbrella of the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT). In the programme Japan-

based English educators go to Lao high schools to work with English teachers and teacher-trainees in order to help develop their skills, in particular trying to foster communicative teaching techniques in the Lao classrooms. Given the various cultural factors that impact on the style of education, as well as differences in the teachers' English proficiency, to what extent can classes become more communicative and student-centred? The rapidly changing economic environment in Laos, where the ability to communicate competently in English opens up a greater number of career possibilities and provides clear instrumental motivation for young Lao people. In addition, the official English textbooks developed for use in secondary schools and the current English teacher-training curriculum both focus on teaching students practical English skills. So the stage is set to adopt CLT, but what are the actual possibilities on the ground?

This paper considers some of the challenges faced by English teachers in Lao public schools, and contrasts them with corresponding challenges in Japan. After introducing the general education setting in Laos there an outline is given of the English teacher training programme at one Lao teacher's college, which is contrasted with teacher training in Japan (Hokkaido). Then I consider English teaching in Laos and the textbooks used, contrasting these with Japanese textbooks. The final section draws together the information about the teaching environment teacher training and the teaching materials and considers the implications in introducing a more student-centred CLT teaching approach in Laos and Japan.

## 2. The Educational Setting in Lao PDR

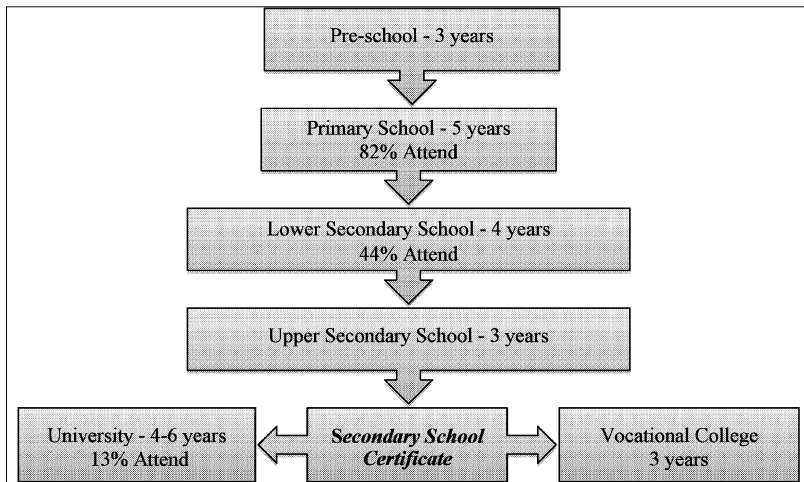
### *Economic background*

The economy of the Lao PDR is developing fast. The current (2010) GDP per capita of \$2,436 puts the Lao PDR at 140 in the IMF rankings. However, GDP rose from \$1.8 billion in 1985 to \$5.6 billion in 2009, and this economic growth has reduced the official poverty rates from 46% in 1992 to 26% in 2010 (World Bank, 2011). In 2009/10 the government received \$586 million from international donors, investing in hydropower, mining, and construction. In particular, China is investing \$7 billion in a new 481km high-speed rail line from Kunming to Vientiane, due to be completed in 2015 (The Economist, 2011). During the past two decades there have also been significant shifts in employment patterns: in 1990, agriculture accounted for 61% of employment, compared to 35% in 2008. Meanwhile, the service sector rose from 24% to 37% of the workforce in the same period (CIA 2011). One of the most significant parts of the service sector is tourism. Tourist arrivals rose from 80,000 in 1996 to 1,300,000 in 2009 (a 16 fold increase), so there is an economic incentive for students to learn English (World Bank, 2011). So, having a good grounding in English is a distinct advantage in the employment market.

### *Education, Literacy and demographics*

The school year has two semesters: (1) beginning of September to end of January. (one-week holiday); (2) beginning of February to end of June. Mandatory education is now 12 years (Figure 1), although the average school life is actually nine years (King & van de Walle, 2005). In 2009 only 75% of children completed primary school, but the amount of

Figure 1 The Education System in Laos



education people receive varies according to three important demographic factors: which ethnic group they belong to; whether they live in an urban or a rural area; their gender (Table 1).

The population is officially divided into three main ethnic groups:

- **Lao Loum (lowland people)** 59% (politically and culturally dominant)
- **Lao Theung (midland people)** 30% (main group in the central and southern mountains)
- **Lao Soung (highland people)** 10% (mountain tribes of mixed cultural heritage living in northern Laos: Hmong (Miao), Yao (Mien), Dao, Shan, and Tibeto-Burman peoples)

Unless the teacher is of the same or similar ethnic group as the students, communication and culturally appropriate education is limited. Regarding ethnicity, students who have no tradition of literacy and for children whose mother tongue is not Lao, English learning is even more of a struggle because they are dealing with 3 languages at school - L1

**Table 1** Average years of schooling of 18 year olds (2002/3) King & van de Walle (2005)

		Average Years of School
Urban	<i>Male Lao-Loum</i>	8.4
	<i>Female Lao-Loum</i>	7.8
	<i>All</i>	<b>8.2</b>
Rural	<i>Male Lao-Loum</i>	6.4
	<i>Male non Lao-Loum</i>	4.1
	<i>Female Lao-Loum</i>	5.1
	<i>Female non Lao-Loum</i>	1.8
	<i>All</i>	<b>4.6</b>
<b>National</b>		<b>5.6</b>

(their indigenous language - the main medium of communication in the home and with their peers), L2 (Lao - the language of education starting at primary school) and L3 (English, from secondary school). Because of these factors, in the late 1980s the enrollment rate for the Lao Sung was less than half that of the Lao Loum. Enrollment was also low for Lao Theung children. Census data from 1995 reveal that 23 percent of the Lao never went to school as compared with 34 per cent of Phutai, 56 per cent of Khmu, and 67 percent of Hmong. More recently, King and van de Walle (2005) showed that while there was little difference between school attendance by ethnic groups in urban areas (Lao Loum = 91%; other groups = 89%), in rural areas the differences were stark (Lao Loum = 82%; other groups = 56%).

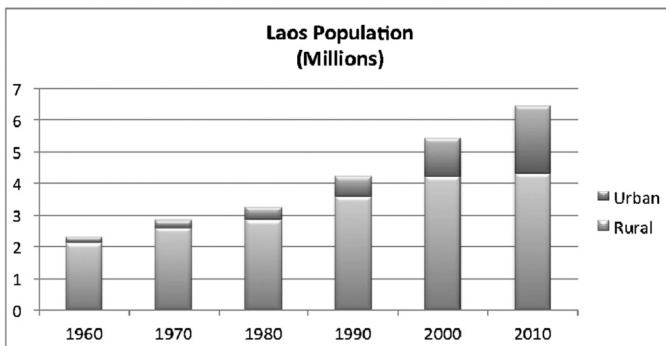
Enrollment and school quality are higher in urban areas, where the usefulness of a formal education is more evident than in rural farming communities. Therefore, during the past fifty years there has been a

steady migration from the countryside to the wealthier urban areas where there is a more developed infrastructure (Figure 2). Vientiane has the majority of advanced schools, including the national teachers' training school at Dong Dok, the irrigation college at Tad Thong, the agriculture college at Na Phok, the National Polytechnic Institute, and the University of Medical Sciences.

Children who come from non-Lao speaking families have a high drop out rate from school and students in rural areas are discouraged from pursuing further education. Also, isolated teachers confronted with primitive rural living and teaching conditions have a difficult time maintaining their own commitment as well as the interest of their pupils.

Literacy in Lao PDR in 2005 was officially recorded at 73% (CIA, 2011), but this also differs due to the aforementioned demographic factors (King & van de Walle, 2005). In urban areas, illiteracy among adults aged 18-40 is low, noted at 5% of men and 10% of women. However, in

**Figure 2** Rural vs. Urban Population (millions) (World Bank, 2011)



rural areas for the same age group there are significant differences between ethnic groups and gender: 13% of Loung Lao men; 22% of Lao Loung women; 38% of non-Lao Loung men; 76% of non-Lao Loung women. Of the total rural population aged 15 and over, women are exactly twice as likely to be illiterate as men. Since few reading materials are available, especially in the rural areas, many newly literate adults lose much of their proficiency after a few years. A 2006 survey of females aged 25 plus who had completed education up to age 15 showed that some 50% had forgotten how to read (Cooper, 2009).

Finally, the number of children attending secondary schools has risen significantly over the past decade from 242,000 in 2000 to 411,000 in 2008 (Benveniste et al, 2008) because more students are staying at school. Yet, as student numbers increase, so does the teacher-student ratio. Even though total teacher numbers have increased (2000=11,900; 2008=18,120) this has not kept pace with the increase in students. One factor affecting this is teacher retention, as qualified teachers seek higher salaries outside teaching (Gannicott & Tibi, 2009: 28-33).

### *School Economics*

According to the World Bank, 90% of capital investments are financed by foreign donors, but these investments in new schools are not being matched by major increases in spending by the government. It therefore predicts that there will be a 'dire shortage of funds for new teachers and textbooks and essential maintenance. Presently, 83% of the national education budget goes on wages, 6% on textbooks and teaching materials and 6% on operations and maintenance (World Bank *Teaching in Lao PDR*). All students pay monthly fees of 10,000 Kip



(\$1.25)<sup>1</sup>. Forty per cent of this goes to the government and 60% goes to the upkeep of the school and for buying school textbooks. The money is collected by the class teacher and given to the Principal. At Nonesath school there is a fee exemption for orphans and boys who live away from their family as novice monks (currently 16 children), but this policy is not universal<sup>2</sup>. However, student fees and the money allocated from the government are insufficient to keep the school, and two headmasters I talked to explained that a significant amount of their time was taken up trying to raise extra money from the local community for school maintenance.

Currently, teachers' monthly salaries are 527,014 Kip (\$66) at lower secondary school and 569,724 Kip (\$71) at upper secondary school. Many teachers need to supplement their income by doing extra jobs (on average, 150,694 Kip (\$18.8) p/m), mainly in agriculture, but 14% of teachers give private classes (Benveniste, 2008). For example, one of the teachers I worked with was giving English classes in the evenings to children in his neighbourhood.

### 3. Teacher training in Laos

In 2005-06 15,738 students were enrolled in teacher training colleges and the annual training cost for each student is 1,700,000 Kip, which is paid by the government (public subsidy) to the training college (Benvenis-

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<sup>1</sup> Average private sector salary = 290,000 Kip/month; Average public sector salary = 405,000 Kip/month (CIA, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> One novice monk I met attending another school in the area was still having to pay fees.

te et al, 2008). There are four methods of entry:

- **Quota** - Extensive application process; students get free tuition and a stipend on the condition they return to their home province to teach.
- **Exam** - Training college entrance exam; students get free tuition and a stipend
- **Nangobay** - Application letter; students get free tuition, but no stipend (this category is for children of national heroes, teachers, leaders & retirees)
- **Non-quota** - Fee paying after failing the entrance exam (in some TEIs, they are taught separately to other students)

Sixty-six percent of trainees are **regular** students (entering through quota, exam or *Nangobay*), who are part of the official teacher education programme: pre-school, primary, lower secondary. The remaining thirty-four percent (non-quota) are **special** students, sponsored by employers (paying annual fees of 600,000 Kip) and who receive salary increase on completion. They mainly study to improve their English language skills and their courses are based on the regular curricula. However, they seldom lead to a teaching career. There has been a very large increase in special students (474% between 2001 and 2004), so they are taking up more resources and college places, but they don't contribute to the supply of teachers when they graduate (ibid: 25).

One trainee explained the system at her own institution, Bounkern Teacher Training College, approximately 30km south east of Vientiane City. In order to enter the English pedagogy course there, students are required to have graduated from upper secondary school and then pass the entry exams given by the faculty of education (general English:

listening, writing, grammar and reading - there is no speaking test). In 2011 the English teacher-training curriculum was reduced from five years to four years. The trainee explained:

Laos is a developing country and so the education system is continually being developed and changed according to new regulations by the Ministry of Education. For example, to make lesson plans I had learned two ways on the same course so it made me confused when I trained. The course I studied at university was 5 years but now it is 4 years. (Trainee D.)

The five-year curriculum includes general subjects taught in Lao and specialist subjects taught in English. Trainees need 175 credits to complete their five year degree and gain their teaching diploma, and assessment for each course is decided by the course instructor.

During the course, in the methodology classes (Years 3, 4 and 5), peer teaching is gradually phased in, culminating in a three-month teaching practicum in the second term of Year 5. During the teaching practicum the trainees' are assessed and graded five times by the high school teachers. The final assessment is decided by the school principle, based on the grades from the five graded teaching sessions, as well as a grade from their home teacher, and input from the community (Teacher BL). After finishing their college courses, graduates receive a teaching licence from the government and they have to find a job at a school. 'Quota' teachers are required to return to their home province to teach in a public school and if they do not enter teaching they are required to pay back their scholarship. However, these regulations are no longer being enforced so the system is breaking down. Also, in 1997/98 provincial governments had to drastically reduce the number of scholarships for

**Table 2** English pedagogy course at Bounkern Teacher Training College (2011)

Year	English skills	Pedagogy/Research Courses	General courses (Lao medium)
I	General English, Reading, Writing, Pronunciation, Grammar		Politics, Mathematics, Environment
II	General English, Reading, Writing, Pronunciation, Grammar		Computer, History, Sociology, Statistics
III	General English, Reading, Writing, Grammar,	Teaching Methodology, English for Special Purposes	General Psychology
IV	General English, Grammar, Translation	Teaching Methodology, Literature, English for Special Purposes, Pedagogy	Statistics
V	General English, Grammar, Translation	Teaching Methodology, Literature, Classroom Management, Research Method Teaching practicum, Graduation report.	

quota teachers to reduce costs, and teacher training enrolments fell substantially (Gannicott & Tibi, 2009: iv).<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Teacher Training in Japan

In Japan teacher training for high schools is the responsibility of general universities and teacher-training universities ‘exercising their respective characteristics’ (MEXT, 2011), which indicates there can be variation in course content between institutions. After passing the teaching courses at their university, graduates wishing to teach at state schools must then pass a licensing examination conducted by the prefectural

<sup>3</sup> However, this picture is not uniform across subjects or across the country. One English teacher in the vicinity of Vientiane reported that the growing importance of English has meant that the supply of English teachers exceeds demand, making it difficult for new teachers to find a job. He now also has to teach Technology because there are not enough teachers for that subject. (Teacher BL)

**Table 3** Credit Requirements for Secondary Teaching Certificate in Japan

Teaching Certificate	Subject-based Courses	Practical Teaching Courses	Subject-based OR Practical Courses	Four Specified Subjects*
Lower Secondary School	20 credits (min)	31 credits (min) (including 2-week teaching practicum)	8 credits (min)	8 credits: Health & Sports, English 1, Constitution, Information processing
Upper Secondary School	20 credits (min)	23 credits (min) (including 3-week teaching practicum)	16 credits (min)	

**\*According to Article 66.6 of the Teacher Licensing Law Enforcement Regulations.**

board of education, valid for ten years. Undergraduate teacher trainees (lower or senior secondary school) need at least 67 credits from general pedagogical courses and subject-based (English) courses, which are in addition to the credits that all undergraduates are required to have to graduate<sup>4</sup>. The required teaching credits are shown in Table 3 (MEXT, 2010).

There is a degree of variance between the exact subject based (English) courses from university to university, but all institutions should provide a range of courses in the following four subject areas: *English linguistics; English literature; English communication; Cross cultural understanding*. In addition to these specialist courses for English teaching, all Japanese undergraduates are required to take general English classes in the first and second year (at least six classes at Otaru University of Commerce). So, by the end of their four years of undergraduate study a Japanese trainee will have taken at least 16 English courses, but

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<sup>4</sup> At Otaru University of Commerce undergraduates need 124 credits to graduate during their four years of study: 52 credits from general subjects and 72 credits from their chosen department.

their major subject of study may not be English (depending on the system at their university or their faculty), unlike the Lao teacher trainees who specialize in English study throughout their five years of study.

### **English Methodology Courses**

In the English methodology courses, trainees should be exposed to a variety of teaching methods and theories of second language acquisition, and they should also learn how to design materials, plan lessons and practice teaching them. They should also be made aware of the aims of the Course of Study for Foreign Language (MEXT, 2008a, 2008b), which stresses a communicative approach to develop practical English language skills. However, although the curriculum is stipulated by the central government, there is some diversity of the provision of teacher training courses between institutions. For example, a review of the English methodology syllabuses at five universities in the Sapporo area (available online) revealed some variation in structure and content (Table 4). Most

**Table 4** English teaching methodology courses at five universities in the Sapporo area

	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Contents</b>
<b>Otaru University of Commerce</b> <i>(Public)</i>	3 methodology courses, two are compulsory.	Contents include materials design, overview of methods, and SLA theories, materials design.
<b>Hokkaido University</b> <i>(Public)</i>	2 methodology classes, one is compulsory.	Understanding different approaches and awareness-raising through class discussions, team-teaching, CALL, communication skills, SLA.
<b>Hokkaido College of Education, Sapporo</b> <i>(Public)</i>	2 methodology courses, one is compulsory.	The compulsory course is a CLT course taught in English.
<b>Fuji Women's University</b> <i>(Private)</i>	2 compulsory methodology courses.	Contents include team-teaching, CALL, communication skills, SLA.
<b>Sapporo Gakuin University</b> <i>(Private)</i>	3 English teaching methodology courses.	Contents include situational & learner factors, instructor's role, theories of language learning, pronunciation, words and spelling, vocabulary, grammar; 4 skills, principles of English teaching, materials design.

of the courses are theoretical, but include a little teaching practice.

### ***Teaching practicum***

The teaching practicum, (2~4 weeks, depending on institution) is part of a designated course taught by a university instructor, for which the trainee receives a credit. It is organized in different ways according to the training university. Trainees are usually assigned to a school public by their university but in some cases (Otaru University of Commerce and Hokkaido University) they have to contact a high school independently to request a placement. In this case they usually do their practicum at the high school they graduated from. At the end of the practicum students teach an observed lesson in front of the supervising teacher and the headmaster, which is graded using a feedback sheet assessing: teaching ability (use of materials, teaching plan, materials development); teaching skills (attitude, teaching ability, using teaching tools); evaluation (evaluation method, use of evaluation, effect on learners); and classroom management. The final report is sent back to the university and incorporated into an overall grade for the course. Potentially, unsuitable trainees could be identified at this stage and either given further training or advised to give up, although, in fact very few students actually fail the teaching practicum, so it might be seen as a required process that has to be gone through, rather than a filtering system for poor candidates.

### ***Accreditation***

After completing the required 67 teaching credits and fulfilling their general university graduation requirements, potential teachers must be accredited by the prefectural board of education to teach in state

schools. Accreditation is by a general written examination in a variety of academic subjects, including their specialized subject (1<sup>st</sup> exam), and if they pass this they have an interview (2<sup>nd</sup> exam). The interview for English has two stages: a group discussion about an educational problem, followed by an individual interview conducted entirely in English. The latter involves two types of assessment: an individual interview to check the candidate's English skill (free conversation followed by questions and answers based on a reading passage); and a mock lesson given by the candidate to the three examiners (Hokkaido, 2011).

Candidates are evaluated according to: Attitude/Conscientiousness/Morality; Expressiveness; Judgment; Motivation/Passion; Leadership in the mock lesson; Leadership in teaching situations. For the mock lesson candidates are given instructions to teach a particular language point and given fifteen minutes to prepare. Then, they teach their lesson to an imaginary class (i.e. there are no actual students) in front of the examiners, for about five to ten minutes. The mock lesson assesses: (1) teaching appropriate to the aims of the lesson; (2): resources to elicit the attention/interest of the students (*ibid*). Successful candidates are put on the register of teachers and assigned to a school at the beginning of the following academic year. Meanwhile, failing candidates are notified by letter and given no feedback on their performance, so they can only guess as to which of the six aspects they need to improve.

The failure rate in the screening tests is incredibly high (Table 5)<sup>5</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> This is true not only regarding English, but across all subjects (Hokkaido, 2011)



**Table 5** Teachers Accredited through Candidate Screening Tests in Hokkaido (2011).

	<u>Candidates</u>	<u>Pass 1<sup>st</sup> Exam</u>	<u>Pass 2<sup>nd</sup> exam (Registered)</u>	<u>Success rate</u>
<b>Upper Secondary</b>	222	31	12	5.4%
<b>Lower Secondary</b>	339	131	54	15.9%

(Hokkaido, 2011)

and begs the question as to why so many people who have gone through the system until that point (i.e. completing all the teaching courses at university including the teaching practicum) are incapable of passing the interview and mock lesson. It is striking that only 12/222 of the original candidates are finally registered, indicating a great inefficiency in the system. Why are so many of the unsuitable candidates not identified much earlier in the process? i.e. (1) before they are accepted to take the teaching courses at their university, (2) during their teacher training courses, or (3) their performance on the teaching practicum. The present system relies heavily on theoretical paper based tests at every stage, and there is very limited opportunity for actual teaching practice. The practicum in Laos is four times longer than in Japan and trainees are formally assessed five times rather than just once. A longer practicum clearly gives more training experience for the trainees and the more frequent assessment allows more opportunity to identify those trainees unsuited to be teachers.

Determined candidates can retake the test in subsequent years, often after they have gained experience as supply teachers in the state system, in private schools or in cram schools, but even then the odds of passing are not favourable. Thus, much time and effort is spent by

university English faculty and by host high schools to prepare undergraduates for their teaching certificate, and yet after all this most candidates will not become teachers, so as in Laos, the system involves a great waste of resources: as noted in section 3, in Laos, 'Special' students take up English teacher training places but they use their English training for non-teaching jobs (Benveniste et al, 2008: 25-6).

A second problem with the Japanese system is that there is no standard check on the candidates' teaching methodology either during the teaching practicum or during the screening tests. Because the teaching practicum is supervised by the high school both the teaching experience itself, and the assessment criteria will be influenced by the teaching priorities of the school. Schools that emphasize the communicative approach outlined in the COS (including the ability to teach in L2) will encourage the trainees to utilize those methods and assess them accordingly. On the other hand, (upper secondary) schools using a G-T approach to prepare their students for university entrance are less likely to give the opportunity for communicative teaching and more likely to de-emphasise this as a factor in the assessment<sup>6</sup>. As for the interview test, the mock lesson is very short, and there are no actual students in the room, so it would be very difficult to determine accurate information about teaching competence or methodological approach. In short, there is scope for at least some trainee English teachers to go through the system and be accredited without having the ability to conduct classes in English or to be able to teach in a student-centred, communicative way.

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed this is borne out by the comments of a number of OUC trainees when they return from their teaching practicum.

These depend on the contents of their university-based teaching courses, which are not standardized across institutions, and on the short (three week) experience of their teaching practicum in the particular school they visit.

## 5. English Classes in Laos

The main school that I visited was Nonesaath, 19 km North of Vientiane. It is a combined lower and upper secondary school, which has 1,500 students in seven year-groups (200 students per year; 40 students per class). At the school one English lesson usually lasts 90 minutes, but there were some 45-minute lessons<sup>7</sup>. There is an English staff of six, but in addition to the full-time teachers, this school also acts as a training centre for teacher-trainees. Third year students at the local teacher training college do their three month placement at the school during February ~ April.

### *Teaching challenges*

- Basic classrooms - noisy, simple fixed desks, rooms that are dark and open to the elements. Class equipment includes textbooks, black or whiteboard, some pictures.
- Lack of textbooks among the children leading to a dependence on the blackboard.
- Variation of English competence among teachers
- Lack of training in communicative techniques among older teachers.

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<sup>7</sup> The basic schedule is as follows: 8:15 ~ 9:00; 9:15 ~ 10:00; 10:15 ~ 11:45; Lunch; 13:30 ~ 15:00.

Specifically how to use the textbooks in the communicative way in which they were designed to be used.

- Pronunciation - many phonetic and intonation differences between English and Lao (see Appendix 2).

Regarding the design and structure of the classrooms, during some classes it was interesting to see other students stop and stand by the open window and watch or even talk to the students in the class. Rarely does the teacher intervene. Also, especially in the older classes there was a deal of coming and going from class, which the teacher seemed to allow without much intervention. However, on the whole it seemed to indicate more a *laissez-faire* approach and a respect towards children rather than an indication of a lack of discipline: students as a whole were attentive and active during their lessons.

Because of the need to copy large chunks of information from the textbook onto the blackboard mistakes are inevitable from time to time. Mistakes in spelling or grammar happened with all three of the teacher trainees I observed. This is important because the students will copy any mistakes from the board into their notebooks and they will be learnt as such. So the whole process incorporates a degree of risk. On the other hand, one advantage of having to write down everything in their notebooks is that the students get much time writing in English. However, it is not clear if they always know what they are writing; they may just be copying without thinking and without understanding.

Nearly all the English teachers and trainees reported that one of their biggest teaching challenges was pronunciation. Lao learners have

difficulty with some English consonant clusters, especially at word end (see Appendix 2). Because of such English pronunciation difficulties the teachers mentioned they would really appreciate having a model they could use in class rather than using their own pronunciation, which they feel is limited. One way to overcome this would be to use listening exercises on CD or tape, but there are no recordings currently available to accompany the textbooks.

### **Teaching Pluses**

Despite the many challenges we were impressed by the dedication of the teachers and the enthusiasm of the children as a whole.

- Enthusiastic students - The students are very attentive and they copy diligently. There are plenty of volunteers to shout out answers when the teacher asks, and they freely ask for clarifications when necessary.
- Disciplined students - School rules (Appendix 3), are strict and there is a system whereby students can lose discipline 'points' during their school year, ranging from 'missing an activity' (lose 10 points), to 'wearing jewellery to school' (lose 50 points) to 'fighting' (lose 400 points). However, the existence of such suggests that there is a perceived need for them, even though, as mentioned above, I did not witness any discipline problems in the classes I was invited to watch.
- An obvious economic incentive for students to learn English, explained in section 2 above.
- Textbooks based on communicative principles developed by the English department at the National University.

The teachers' biggest advantage is the attitude of the students who seemed highly motivated and disciplined. Also, many of the older

teachers seemed willing to improve their skills and techniques, to make up for the lack of resources and the other conditions under which they worked. Also, it seemed that, compared to Japanese teachers who have many pastoral and administrative duties in addition to class preparation, the Lao teachers could spend more of their working day focusing on teaching.

### **Lao English Textbooks**

The Ministry of Education requires all public secondary schools to use specified English textbooks designed and produced by the academic staff at the National University of Laos, (25,000 Kip (\$2.50)). The books could easily be used in a communicative lesson, as they focus on language use rather than on structure and they have plenty of activities that are suitable for pair and group work. At Nonesath school all 5 of these official textbooks are being used: Books 1 to 4 are for lower and upper secondary school students (children aged 11-17), and the new Book 7 is used in the final year of upper secondary school. However, due to availability or cost, many students don't have textbooks (the actual proportion varies across classes and more particularly across schools), which means that the teacher has to write up many exercises and reading passages on the board which the students copy into their notebooks. Nonesath school, which is supported financially by a local volunteer organization - the Women's International Group, has a stock of books that can be used by all students in the school, but neither of the other two schools I visited had this system.

In the books, there is very little use of Lao (see Appendix 4), and all the instructions in the books are in English. Lao only appears in the

vocabulary box at the start of each section. The topics in the units are designed to connect with what the students were likely to encounter in their daily lives, including the economics and technology of rice cultivation, health concerns such as AIDS or Malaria.

The older Lao textbooks (Books 2~4) contain listening exercises that need cassette tapes or CD recordings, but the newer books (Books 1 and 7) require the teacher to do the readings. However, since many teachers are not confident of their English pronunciation this can be challenging for them. If tapes or CDs were available, potentially they could be used at this school, although audio players were not being used for regular classes<sup>8</sup>. The lack of textbooks means that teachers have to copy all the contents onto the board. The students then copy this into their notebooks, which gives much scope for misspellings, mis-punctuations and grammar mistakes. Everything is written in English apart from the vocabulary lists, which have Lao translations.

I asked one of the most competent and experienced teachers how easy the textbooks are to use, and how they could be improved to make teaching easier. He commented that it was difficult for the Lao English teachers to use the textbooks because they do not have clear explanations (there are not teacher's versions of the books), so some teachers are not confident enough in how to teach them. Especially he pointed to the new textbook for the older students (Book 7). It seems that while the English-only design and the plethora of interactive activities follows sound communicative principles, the lack of directions about how to

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<sup>8</sup> This school did run some additional, after hours, English classes for learners who would pay extra, and for which audio players were available.

implement the activities, is a big handicap for those teachers who have not been trained in communicative methodology. So they end up drawing on a teacher-centred approach that is more familiar to them -dictating information and getting the students to chorus the dialogues and vocabulary instead of developing a more interactive classroom culture with pairwork and group work activities. This is exacerbated by the lack of textbooks, and the attempts to overcome this by having the children copy down the textbook contents from the board verbatim: some teachers copy everything from the book onto the board, including the instructions to the exercises, since these were also in English. So the children end up with their own, penned, version of the textbook, making no distinction between the target language and the language used for instructions and having little time to use the target language in a practical way. And as one teacher pointed out, the more advanced the books are, the more difficult it is for the teachers to know how to use them in a communicative way. However, this being said, the problem appears to be not so much the materials themselves as the need for more communicative-based training among current/experienced teachers.

### *Japanese English Textbooks*

English textbooks in Japan are produced by independent publishers and have to be approved by MEXT for use in public schools<sup>9</sup>. Students use one English textbook for each of the three years of lower secondary school with units organized by functions or themes and containing exercises to develop all four skills while building up vocabulary and grammar (for example, New Horizon, 2006). During the three years of upper

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<sup>9</sup> For the textbook examination procedure see: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/education/textbooks/index.html>



secondary school four textbooks are used, one for each course on the national curriculum: English I/II (focusing on structure and functions), English Reading (reading comprehension), and English Writing (for example see Power On, 2007). At all levels there is much more use of L1 (Japanese) than in the Lao textbooks: giving instructions, annotations explaining grammar points and vocabulary usage, background setting for reading passages, sentence translations for grammar exercises, comprehension questions and vocabulary glossaries (see Appendix 5). In fact every page has some Japanese, and some pages have more Japanese than English.

This approach to textbook design, while giving support to learners in their native language, does little to promote the usage of the target language; instead it directs the learner to use meta-language to analyse the target language, hence encouraging a grammar-translation approach by the teacher. So reading passages have to be understood through translation rather than through discussion about the contents in the target language.

On the other hand, regarding the cultural focus of the textbooks, there is a substantial amount of content on Japan, just as the Lao books use Lao-based content. One study found that Japan related-topics accounted for 36% of lower secondary and 26% of upper secondary textbooks content (Yamanaka, 2006: 68). English is used to talk about the home culture, thereby developing the idea of English as a global language rather than being foreign and tied to the 'inner circle' of English speaking countries (38% and 30% respectively in the same study).

### Lao Teaching Style

All the trainee teachers and most of the experienced teachers I observed gave basic instructions in English: “Listen to me” “Listen and repeat”, “Look at me”, “Close your book.”, “Are you finished?”, and so on. Also, students begin and end all classes with greetings in English - “Good morning teacher.”, “Thank you teacher.” After the initial greetings the teacher asks volunteers to say the date in English, which he/she writes on the board. However, in most classes there was also a lot of L1 instruction and some translation of target vocabulary items from the book. Clearly, a strict English-only policy would be counterproductive. Even so, I thought that the students might be better served if the teachers could introduce new words and concepts without using Lao. Once the students have understood them, the teacher could then check understanding by asking them for a Lao translation. So, finding the right balance between L1 and L2 usage by the teacher is key. Most of the trainees clearly had a good grounding from their training college in how to use English as the medium of instruction (something the Japanese government has recently mandated for upper secondary school English classes). Outside class, Lao students are given homework, which is marked and used for grading. One teacher reported that he sets writing assignments for his older students, but that not all students do it. Apart from that, beyond the verbal comments students get during the class it was not clear what kind of feedback they get about their English.

During my time in the classes, I became aware that some students, even in the upper years, had difficulties reading and writing in Lao. Therefore, given the style of English instruction (lots of copying from the blackboard) these students will be severely handicapped in learning

English. It seemed as if the chorus repeating of exercises from the textbook might be mere parroting with little understanding. If this is the case, maybe such students might be better served by a focus on basic English reading skills during their school career (i.e. gradually building up from sentences to paragraphs to longer pieces). Such an approach would also have to run in tandem with the development of literacy skills in Lao, but with current resources it is doubtful that the school could offer such remedial teaching. This issue may be something that trainees can be made aware of in discussions during their methodology courses, considering when it might be most appropriate to stick with L2 and when L1 might work better.

#### *Interventions to promote CLT and student-centred learning*

After observing their classes, I was able to work with some teachers individually to see if they could introduce more interactive techniques. Not only the trainees, but also some experienced teachers were keen to try out new ideas, and we tried out a number of ideas. For example, with one teacher at Tha Ngone school we thought how we might be able to use props (classroom furniture, books and simple pictures) to liven up the teaching of “these/those” from Book 1:

- (1) Show and say (teacher); (2) repeat after teacher; (3) then write on board/copy in notebook; (4) finally pairwork Q & A.
- (2) Only write English on the board - but use some Lao for class management, when there is a real need to point out specific language information, or, most importantly, for rapport-building.

I observed one class taught by a group of three trainees after I and other volunteers had had such discussions with them, and the results were

encouraging. The trainees used English as the medium of instruction and they were also using props (pictures or objects) to introduce the new vocabulary from the book ('hotel', 'vase', 'bag', 'car'). The trainees also tried to get the students to work collaboratively in small groups to do the activity (fill in the gaps), and I was able to see this in action with varying degrees of success, depending on the make up of each group. After the groups had finished, one of the trainees asked for answers from the groups and filled in the answers on the board. It was clear that these trainees had understood the principles involved in making the classes more interactive; they had prepared a student-centred class, implemented it systematically, and had successfully engaged the students. Hopefully, their readiness to understand and do something new might not be limited to the teaching practicum situation.

## **6. CLT in Japan - current orthodoxies and government intentions**

The Japanese government's desire to develop practical, communicative English skills in schools is being prompted in part by the concerns of the Japanese business community. For example, Koike et al (2008) surveyed 7,354 Japanese company employees about their own English proficiency and to determine what kind of English proficiency is needed for international businesses. They found that in general English communication skills (e.g. negotiation and presentation skills) were insufficient for effective international business situations, and they attributed this to the current style of English language education in Japan. Teaching in all public schools in Japan should conform to the Ministry of Education (MEXT)'s course of study (COS), which they revise and publish every five years. The current COS for English in lower and upper secondary

schools were implemented in the academic year beginning April 2009, (MEXT 2008a, MEXT 2008b). Here are the overall objectives for lower secondary school:

To develop students' basic practical communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.<sup>10</sup> MEXT (2008a)

and for upper secondary school:

To develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.<sup>11</sup> MEXT (2008b)

Both these COS lay out very clearly the skills and language functions that should be taught and how they should be taught, and they place much emphasis on developing practical communication skills. The courses are functionally based and stress the promotion of language use in situations that are relevant to the students' lives. Moreover, a significant proposal for the 2013 COS for English is that high school English classes should be taught primarily in English. While both the existing and the forthcoming COS do not overtly prescribe a particular teaching methodology, it is clear from the course content that a communicative approach is being

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<sup>10</sup> Original Japanese: 外国語を通じて、言語や文化に対する理解を深め、積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度の育成を図り、聞くこと、話すこと、読むこと、書くことなどのコミュニケーション能力の基礎を養う

<sup>11</sup> Original Japanese: 外国語を通じて、言語や文化に対する理解を深め、積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度の育成を図り、情報や考えなどを的確に理解したり適切に伝えたりするコミュニケーション能力を養う。

promoted rather than grammar-translation (G-T), still the method of choice for many high school teachers (Caluianu & Holst, 2008).

Undoubtedly, G-T persists so much in high schools because English learning has become so entwined with university entrance exam preparation. Since the 1970s high school and university entrance exams have been generally recognized as fostering a cramming education (*tsumekomikyouiku*), which fails to encourage creativity or critical thinking (Schoppa, 1991: 49–50). English is a compulsory subject in most university entrance tests, and therefore high school students have a powerful instrumental motivation to study the subject while teachers have a clear objective. It is easy to see why high school English classes become dominated by G-T: they are driven by the students' need to be able to read difficult texts in English and decipher comprehension questions that are based on tricky grammar points and a knowledge of infrequently used vocabulary items. Given this, it is not surprising that teachers fall back on G-T because, by doing micro-analysis of structure and sentence-by-sentence translation of the text, they can be confident that they have imparted objective knowledge about English to their students and thereby they are doing their job. However, the result of this is that not only are writing, listening and speaking skills deprioritized, but this approach also degrades 'reading' into metalinguistic text analysis, which distracts the learner's attention away from the overall discourse and the most fundamental purpose of any written text: to communicate ideas.

So, MEXT's focus on the communicative purpose of foreign language learning is being ignored by some Japanese teachers who persist in grammar instruction to the detriment of their students' practical English

skills. Communication is seen as a distraction to the ‘real business’ of exam preparation, so generations of Japanese high school students come to associate English with tedious grammatical analysis and translation. One other factor contributing to the hold of G-T is cultural: CLT is a student-centred approach, whereas G-T is very much teacher-centred. Yoneyama (1999) describes the typical teacher-centred Japanese classroom as being mechanical, instrumental and competitive with learners as passive receivers of knowledge (p74). Students are discouraged from relating knowledge about individual experience, and they come to regard studying as no more than preparation to pass entrance examinations (p143). Students become dependent on a teacher who dispenses knowledge that they write down, learn, and regurgitate for tests. This being the case, effective task-based CLT requires a shift in classroom culture to promote learner autonomy.

In contrast, in Laos, students’ instrumental motivation to learn English comes not from the need to get high scores in tests in order to enter universities, but from the real rewards that can potentially be had in the job market that comes with the ability to communicate in written and spoken English. Like the Japanese government, the Lao government recognizes the need for communicative language teaching, and we can see from the design of the textbooks and the curriculum at the teacher training college that it is serious about its intent. In the schools I visited there was a tangible desire to develop better English education. The teacher-trainees in particular give much energy improving their methods and engage the students. There was a great effort to teach the classes through English, using Lao only to write on the board for translations, after the English words have been learnt.

## 7. Conclusion - Implementing CLT in Japan and Laos

The governments of Laos and Japan are both trying to develop more practical communicative-based English learning in their secondary schools. However, both countries have a tradition of teacher-centred instruction that seems to militate against this task-based student-centred approach. In this paper I have tried to show how CLT is implemented on the ground in Laos, and how it differs from the approach in Japan. The need for practical English may be more evident to Lao learners, since it is linguistically and ethnically less homogeneous than Japan. Non-native Lao speakers (Lao Theung and Lao Song) in particular might be more open to speaking other languages as part of their daily life, and thus see more obvious benefits in learning practical English. Even so, the governments of both countries want student-centred, communicative teaching that promotes English as a language that the learners can use in a practical way in their future. The ways in which this is being implemented in the classrooms differs due to cultural attitudes, material resources and the way the teachers respond to them, differences in teacher training, and the priorities and motivations of the students.

In both countries language learning is largely teacher-centred. In Japan, MEXT has designed and published a very clear series of guidelines 'Course of Study for Foreign Languages' (2003, 2009) stressing the development of the learners' practical communication skills in both oral and written English. It also stresses the need for high school teachers to teach English through English. Yet, it is clear that L1 medium grammar-translation continues to be the method of choice in high schools in Japan. This is driven partly by the perceived need to prepare students for reading



and translation-based university entrance examinations and the consequent deprioritising of practical English communication skills within the high school curriculum. But, it is also driven by the lack of confidence of many Japanese English teachers in using English as the language of instruction, (Holst & Caluianu, 2008). In Laos, on the other hand, English teaching is characterized by copying information from the board and chorusing sentence patterns, which is partly due to the lack of textbooks and other teaching resources and partly due to a lack of communicative teaching skills training among many of the experienced teachers.

Differences in teacher training also have an impact on the teaching style in the classroom, specifically, the quantity and quality of methodology classes, and the length of the teaching practicum. The teaching practicum in Laos is much longer than in Japan, and there is much more practical teaching during the teaching methodology courses in Laos than in Japan. Also, the qualification procedure in Japan does not allow enough weeding out of unsuitable candidates in the early stages: in Hokkaido the Part 2 interview section of the licensing exam has a massive failure rate suggesting either that too many poor candidates are getting through the system and being allowed to take the test, or that the assessment criteria are not specific enough to allow the candidates to know what the examiners want and therefore they cannot prepare properly. On the other hand in Laos, students who enter a teacher training college will proceed through the programme and graduate as teachers. So, in Laos, growing secondary school student numbers means there is a higher demand for teachers overall, and there is even more demand in the provinces because 'quota' students do not return there to teach. Whereas in Japan, there is an over-supply of people with teaching certificates,

giving local boards of education much power as gate-keepers to precious teaching jobs in public schools.

Finally, there are differences in learner motivation and the perceived meaning of English education. In Japan attitudes embedded since at least the 1970s tie education to exam success, and this is combined with low instrumental motivation to learn English. Meanwhile, in Laos there is a new dynamic top-down education system where motivation is high due to employment potential, but where a lack of resources and qualified teachers is a constant challenge for schools. Extrinsic (instrumental) motivation for Lao students is potentially high, but this depends on how the children perceive their career opportunities, and it will vary greatly depending on rural/urban settings and the ethnicity of the students. Teachers do not teach for external examinations or university entrance tests - English assessment is for internal use. On the other hand, instrumental motivation for Japanese students is tied more to entrance exams than the potential to use English in their future careers. Overall, while in both settings there are significant barriers to developing CLT as the standard methodology in secondary schools, the entrenched educational (cultural) barriers in Japan may prove stronger than the current economic barriers in Laos.

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### Acknowledgements

I owe thanks to many people for their help in researching this paper. Ami Sato for her help in seeking information about teacher training in Hokkaido. Mr. Bounleun Phaiphibane, my liaison teacher at Nonesath school, who also provided me with much background information about the current teaching situation and about the teacher training system. Ms. Detthavanh Det, who provided information about the teacher-training course at Bounkern Teacher training College. Thank you also to all the teachers and teacher trainees who I was privileged to work with and who allowed me to observe and record their classes. I am grateful also, to Ellen Head, a fellow volunteer with whom I have spent much time discussing and thinking about English education in Laos and who has given many useful comments on this paper. Finally, I am especially grateful to Chris Ruddenklau, the tireless organizer of the THT programme in Laos, who gave me the opportunity to visit Laos and has provided unfailing support to me and all the other volunteers from Japan.

## Appendix 1 English teaching licensing procedure (Part 2 - Interview)

### 検査の実施方法

検査は次の二通りの方法により実施することとし、検査室への入室時から英語で検査を進める

- 1：自由会話日常的なことについて自由に会話をする。
- 2：英問英答
  - (1) 検査員が受検者に英文課題1つを示し、黙読させる。(2分間)
  - (2) 黙読させた後英文を音読させ、検査員は英文の内容に関する質問をし、受検者に答えさせる。

### 判定

個別面接検査評価基準

態度・誠実性・倫理性

- (2) 表現力
- (3) 判断力
- (4) 意欲・情熱
- (5) 指導力模擬授業
- (6) 指導力場面指導

学校種別に応じた各教科や特別活動の内容に関し授業を行い、応答を通して対応能力も観るなどして授業の実践的指導力を備えているかどうかを評価するものです。

観点1 授業のねらいに応じた適切な指導

観点2 児童生徒の興味・関心を引き出す工夫

(Translation)

### Exam Procedure

The test shall proceed in English from the time the candidate enters the examination room and assessment shall be carried out using the following two methods:

1. Free talk; free conversation about everyday matters.
2. Answering English questions in English
  - (1) The inspectors show the candidate one topic in English and get him/her to read it silently. (2 minutes)
  - (2) After reading silently, the English text will be read aloud, the inspector will ask questions about the English content, which the candidate will answer.

### Decision

Inspection criteria for individual interviews.

Evaluation criteria for second stage of teaching certification in Hokkaido 2012

- (1) Attitude/Conscientiousness/Morality
- (2) Expressiveness
- (3) Judgement
- (4) Motivation/passion
- (5) Leadership - Trial lesson
- (6) Leadership - Teaching situations

This assesses whether the candidate can conduct their specialty classes and activities with regard to the content of each subject and according to the type of school, and whether he/she can teach through practical leadership, such as the ability to deal with responses:

Aspect 1: Teaching appropriate to the aims of the lesson

Aspect 2: Resources to elicit the attention/interest of the students

## Appendix 2 Pronunciation difficulties of Lao learners of English

p <u>l</u> ayed	friend <u>d</u>	s <u>i</u> x	<u>f</u> loor	busy	watch <u>e</u> d
volleyball	help <u>e</u> d	sister	pet	bed	tr <u>u</u> e
soak <u>e</u> d	buffalo	s <u>o</u> wn	field	g <u>r</u> owing	<u>p</u> ulled
<u>w</u> hile	stor <u>e</u> d	fals <u>e</u>	<u>b</u> ox		

## Other sounds

'started' difficulties with the final /id/

'quite' ⇒ 'quiet'

'muscle' ⇒ /s/ changes to /f/

'sprained' ⇒ 'spreyand'

/h/ at the start of a word ⇒ difficult to distinguish between 'he' and 'she'

Note: A more detailed and systematic description of stress and pronunciation for Thai EFL learners can be found at Ted Power (2011).

## Appendix 3 'School Rules'

**1 Read**

**School discipline**

All schools have rules. If students break the rules, there are penalties. Schools in Lao PDR have a system of discipline points. The penalty for breaking a rule is to lose some points. Each student starts the school year with 600 points. At the end of the school year, the school director sends a report to the student's parents giving the final number of discipline points.

Here are some of the penalties for rule-breaking at secondary schools:

- miss an activity	lose 10 points
- come to school not wearing uniform	
- miss saluting the flag	lose 20 points
- have long hair (boys)	
- drop rubbish in the school or yard	
- wear jewellery to school	lose 50 points
- cheat during a test	
- have your ears pierced (boys)	lose 100 points
- smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol	
- behave badly at home	
- play cards	lose 200 points
- take drugs	
- fight	lose 400 points
- steal valuable things	lose 500 points

English for Lao Secondary Schools Book 3, Unit 3 p22

Appendix 4 English for Lao Secondary Schools Book 3, Unit 7 'Communication' pp62-3

Unit 7

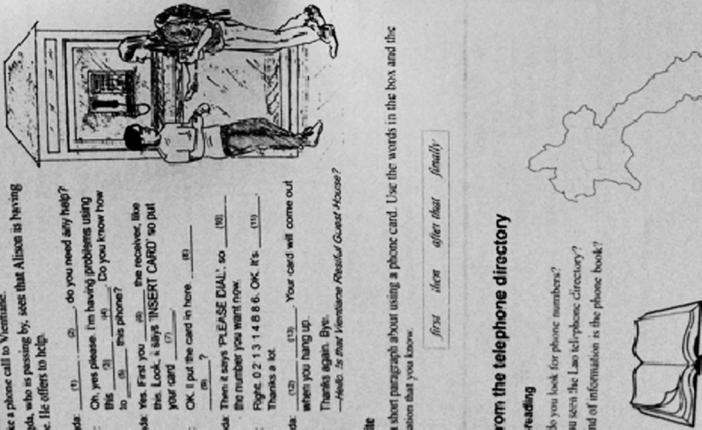
**4 Listen and complete**  
 Alison is a tourist visiting Xeomenghouang. She's just bought a phone card and she wants to make a phone call to Vietnam.  
 The guide, who is passing by, sees that Alison is having trouble. He offers to help.

Thongda: (1) \_\_\_\_\_ do you need any help?  
 Alison: Oh, yes please. I'm having problems using the (2) \_\_\_\_\_.  
 Thongda: Yes. First you (3) \_\_\_\_\_ the receiver, like you do with a (4) \_\_\_\_\_ phone.  
 Alison: OK. I put the card in here. (5) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Thongda: Then it says 'PLEASE DIAL', so (6) \_\_\_\_\_ the number you want to call.  
 Alison: Right. 0 2 1 3 1 4 8 8 6. OK. It's (7) \_\_\_\_\_ Thanks a lot.  
 Thongda: (8) \_\_\_\_\_ Your card will come out when you hang up.  
 Alison: Thanks again. Bye.  
 —Hello. Is that *Vientiane Restful Guest House*?

**5 Write**  
 Write a short paragraph about using a phone card. Use the words in the box and the information that you know.


first    then    after    their    family

**6 From the telephone directory**  
 1 Pre-reading  
 Where do you look for phone numbers?  
 Have you seen the Lao telephone directory?  
 What kind of information is in the phone book?



Communications

**Vocabulary -**  
 telephone directory (or phone book)  
 area code  
 operator  
 direct dialling  
 connect  
 local



**2 Find**  
 Here are some questions about making provincial phone calls. Find the answers as quickly as possible. Write the answers in your notebooks.

- 1 What's the area code for Pakse?
- 2 What's the area code for Vientiane?
- 3 You want to call 512 965 in Sam Neua. You are phoning from Vientiane. Write all the numbers you will dial.
- 4 If you dial the 61 area code, which province are you calling?
- 5 What's the area code for Boko?
- 6 You have dialled: 0 51 623 812. Which area are you calling?

**Inter-Provincial Calls**  
 To make a direct-dial call from Vientiane to another province, or from one province to another, first dial '0' to obtain provincial access, then dial the area code, then dial the number. For example, to call the Luang Prabang number 21 1234 from Vientiane, dial:

provincial access	+	area code	+	local number	
0	+	71	+	21 1234	

**Provincial Area Codes**

Area	Area code	Area	Area code
Attapeu	031	Sam Neua	64
Boko	084	Saravane	31
Luang Namtha	88	Sivankhilit	41
Luang Prabang	71	Sekong	031
Oudomxay	81	Styaboury	74
Paksan	54	Thakhek	51
Phakxai	31	Vientiane	24
Phongsavay	088	Xeomenghouang	61

*(Adapted from the Lao telephone directory)*

