

# Whose development?

A Cultural Analysis  
of an AusAID English Language Project  
in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

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*The problem of Eurocentrism and hence the problem of development, is ... the problem of knowledge. It is a problem of discovering Other ways of knowing, being and doing. It is a problem of how to be human in ways Other than those of Europe. It is also a problem of how the West could liberate its true self from its colonial history and moorings.*

*(Ziauddin Sardar, 1999)*

*The challenge to humanity is to adopt new ways of thinking, new ways of living. The challenge is also to promote different paths of development, informed by a recognition of how cultural factors shape the way in which societies conceive their own futures and choose the means to attain these futures.*

*(Perez de Cuellar, 1996)*

*Ethnocentrism consists of the unwarranted establishing of the specific values of one's own society as universal values.*

*(Tzvetan Todorov, 1993)*

## Declaration

I, Lynda Achren, declare that the PhD thesis entitled 'Whose Development?: A Cultural Analysis of an AusAID English Language Project in the Lao People's Democratic Republic' is no more than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

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Date 20/08/07

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## **Abstract**

Since the disintegration in the eighteenth century of their once-mighty ‘Kingdom’ of Lan Xang, the ethnic Lao have maintained a struggle for political and cultural independence against waves of foreign dominance. Over the centuries, the Lao have faced the cultural hegemony of their linguistic cousins the Siamese, the territorial ambitions of the Vietnamese, the ethnocentrism of French colonialists, and the cataclysmic anti-communist imperialism of the United States of America. In this more peaceful era, Lao articulation of their worldview remains constrained by powerful external forces.

Engaging in debates within critical development studies and applied linguistics, and drawing on understandings from sociology, this inter-disciplinary study examines how the cultural hegemony of the past is perpetuated in the dominant development discourse and, in turn, enacted at project level. With a particular development assistance project serving as a lens for viewing broader development issues, the study ultimately presents a glimpse of an alternative development possibility. The study thus adds to the voices of those who argue against the exclusive Eurocentric view of modernity, and for the possibility of what Tu Wei-ming (1999) refers to as ‘multiple modernities’.

Beginning with an examination of the Buddhist-legitimated socio-political organisation of the pre-colonial Lao, based primarily on the work of Martin Stuart-Fox (1998), the study argues that the pre-colonial worldview has continued to inform the values and actions of the ethnic Lao throughout their history of foreign domination, and despite the more recent political embracing of Marxism-Leninism. Drawing on the work of critical development theorists such as Escobar (1984; 1995a; 1995b), Tucker (1997a; 1999) and Munck and O’Hearn (1999), and illustrated with Lao examples, the study then examines the disjunctions between these values and those of the dominant development discourse with its roots in the Eurocentric notion of modernity, and its current neo-liberal economic agenda.

The theme of disjunction features throughout this study, which centres on an AusAID-funded project in the Lao PDR aimed at implementing a competency-based English language curriculum for Lao government officials. As well as the disjunction between Lao values and those of the dominant development discourse, the thesis

includes a practitioner's first-hand insight into the disjunctions between Lao values and the curriculum model, and between the project design and Lao social reality. However, a major aim of this ethnographic study is to give voice to Lao stakeholders at policy, management and classroom levels. Their voices are woven into a series of narratives through which we are afforded insights into the disjunctions between Lao and donor priorities. As a result of these disjunctions, as the three-year AusAID project drew to a close the Lao demonstrated a commitment to the program but revealed a range of political, cultural and pedagogical factors which threatened its stability and ultimate sustainability.

These Lao stories, together with those articulating the unfolding of events over the ensuing eighteen months, exemplify the conflict inherent in development assistance. On the one hand the accounts reveal how the unequal balance of power works to stifle the articulation of worldviews other than that of the dominant West, and how development workers inadvertently perpetuate the discourse's 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) that holds the Lao worldview irrelevant in a 'modern' world. On the other hand, we hear through the Lao voices how the agency of local stakeholders subverts the imposition of values, so that the English language program better reflects Lao priorities.

As the thesis demonstrates, the subversion is in the form of a Buddhist-infused 'middle way solution' to the culturally problematic values underpinning the competency-based curriculum, which effectively restructures the approach to fit within acceptable, albeit modified, socio-cultural boundaries. The solution provides a tool for the analysis of the appropriateness of the curriculum model, the project design and, ultimately, the dominant development discourse for the Lao context. Standing as a metaphor for diverse possibilities, the Middle Way Solution suggests the need for development donors and practitioners to engage reflexively in our own practice, and offers a distinctly Lao alternative to the dominant discourse.

## Map of the Lao PDR



The individuals referred to in this thesis worked in Vientiane City and the provinces indicated by the green shading on the map. The \* symbol indicates the country's teacher training colleges where many of them worked or studied.

For a range of linguistic and historical reasons, transliterating Lao script into English presents difficulties, and there is little agreement on the spelling of many words. The spellings used on this map are those agreed upon by the Lao implementing team of the project at the centre of this study.

## Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
AVI	Australian Volunteers International
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELRC	English Language Resource Centre
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
GoL	Government of Laos
HRD	Human Resource Department
IELTS	International English Language Testing
IFL	Institute of Foreign Languages
IRTC	International Relations Training Centre
ISLPR	International Second language Proficiency Rating
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LAELP	Lao Australia English Language Project
LEFAP	Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
MFA	Ministry Of Foreign Affairs
MOE	Ministry of Education
NEM	New Economic Mechanism
NUOL	National University of Laos
SAC	Self Access Centre
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
TDC	Teacher Development Centre
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TTC	Teacher Training College
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UPPEEP	University Of Phnom Penh English and Education Project
US	United States (of America)
USA	United States of America
VSO	Volunteer Service Overseas

## Chapter 1: Other ways of knowing, being and doing

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### *A snapshot of the researcher*

*My supervisor remarked that I had been insufficiently socialised into AusAID. I've been thinking about it ever since. Perhaps being the child of an English trade unionist predisposed me to challenge dominant discourses. Certainly, I enthusiastically challenged them as part of the counter culture and feminist movement of the late 60s when we sought alternative ways of knowing, being and doing.*

*When I was a teenager, my parents, as ten pound migrants in search of a better deal, brought the family to Australia. It was a confronting experience, but attending high school led me to appreciate that it was far more confronting for my classmates from Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia and a host of other 'foreign' countries. I was fascinated by their migration stories, their languages and their ways of doing things, so perhaps it was inevitable that I was drawn to working in a field involving language, culture and migration. By the late 80s I was coordinating a refugee youth program in Melbourne. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the students were from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. After four years, I wanted to know more about where my students were from and so, in January 1990, I went to Laos with the Australian Volunteers International (AVI) program, joining the sprinkling of 'Westerners' working there amongst the hundreds of advisors from the Soviet Union. AVI stresses that its volunteers are there to work for the country in which they are placed and this guided me in the two years I worked at the National Polytechnic Institute helping to set up an English program. Although contact with foreigners outside work hours was officially frowned upon by the country's leaders in the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the staff ignored this and included me in their social activities – weddings, funerals, shared meals, beer and sparrow in the shack outside the institute's gates.*

*For me it offered, for the first time, the opportunity to observe a culture in situ, learn a language in the place where it was spoken, and grapple with becoming literate in another script. Through this experience I came to understand a different way of relating to people. And, perhaps most importantly, I came to understand that what I saw as priorities were not always priorities for my Lao colleagues. I carried these understandings with me into my subsequent work on development projects, and probably it is they, more than anything else, which brought me ultimately to view 'development' as a culturally constructed discourse underpinned by values not necessarily shared by the so-called 'underdeveloped'.*

There is a Buddhist story that Prince Siddharta, who later became known as the Gautama Buddha, first lived a life of extreme luxury and then one of extreme hardship. One day when he was meditating he heard a musician instruct a pupil that if the strings of the instrument were too tight they would break and not play. Nor would they play if they were too slack. The future Buddha then realised that the path to truth lay in the Middle Way between extremes. Like the Buddhist story of the Middle Way, this study is a narrative of appropriateness. The study is centred on the transference, with Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) funding, of a competency based model of education to the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) – a multi-ethnic, Marxist-inspired state with Buddhism as its official religion. On one level the study offers analysis of the appropriateness of this curriculum model to the Lao socio-political and cultural context. On another level it analyses the appropriateness of the AusAID project design for that context, while a third level critically appraises the appropriateness of the current development paradigm for meeting Lao personal and political development priorities and aspirations.

At the heart of the study are the responses of Lao individuals at policy, local and classroom levels – locations in which the ethnic Lao predominate. Consequently, throughout the study, references to Lao individuals relate, not to members of the national group, but to members of this ethnic group, whose voices, although locally dominant, are rarely heard from their location on the margins of the global structure of power. As this narrative of power and agency unfolds, the Middle Way story is seen to play a central role in shaping Lao responses to the transfer, via the project, of the models of both the competency-based approach and, more broadly, of development.

The study was initiated with the intention of investigating the potential sustainability of the English language curriculum developed and implemented as part of the Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) project. Over time, as the research progressed, I came to see the Lao responses and the project design as a lens for examining 'development'. In this analysis I adopt the post-structuralist view that development is a culturally-constructed discourse, which has systematically defined what it means to be 'modern', 'developed' or 'underdeveloped'. This 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980:133) holds the West to be the model of modernity towards which the 'underdeveloped' can progress. This 'truth' is produced, sustained and extended by the practices of international development assistance, which acts as a vehicle for

‘types of power and knowledge [to be] deployed in the Third World which try to insure [sic] the conformity of its peoples to a certain type of economic and cultural behaviour’ (Escobar, 1984:382).

This understanding of development as a culturally-constructed discourse, along with a growing awareness that development did not achieve its stated aims, led some scholars to adopt an ‘anti-development’ stance (cf. Sachs, 1992). However, more recently, others have focussed their attention on the ethnocentrism of the discourse as being a major factor negatively affecting the development process (e.g. Ang, 1998; Munck & O’Hearn, 1999; Tucker, 1999, 1997b). For example, Ien Ang (1998:102) has pointed out that the development constructs an ‘Other’ with ‘no agency of its own ... always placed at the receiving end of “Europeanisation” and “Westernisation”’. However, she further argues that this view fails to recognise that ‘those at the receiving end of these processes are actively making their own histories even if it is always inescapably in conditions not of their making’. Moreover, she reminds us that ‘these traditional “other” cultures do not absorb “Western” culture passively, but actively indigenise and appropriate, negotiate and sometimes resist its forms and practices’<sup>1</sup>.

Such understandings effectively move the argument beyond ‘anti-development’ to ‘post-development’, described by Fagan (1999:188) as a ‘theoretical move ... to the language of reconstruction, transformation and possibility’. The Middle Way story, and the Lao responses in which it is embodied, are examples of agential transformation and a glimpse of an alternative development possibility. Through their illumination, this study aims to contribute to the critical dialogue calling for the ‘reimagining [of] development in a more inclusive way’ (Tucker, 1997a:10) in order to encompass local knowledges, priorities and values.

Paralleling the critical development dialogue, the issue of the appropriateness of transferring education models and methodologies socially constructed in ‘Western’ advanced technological countries has been of concern to educationalists for decades. Concerns have centred on the failure of such transfers to take into account the social context, cultural environment and differing traditions of the countries into which the

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<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the diversity within and across the cultures covered by the terms ‘the West’ and ‘Western’, I use them to emphasise the shaping of thought by shared historical events and philosophical traditions.

transfer is being attempted (e.g. Crossley, 1984; Kumar, 1979; Le Sourd, 1990; Lee et al., 1988; O'Donoghue, 1994; Watson, 1994), with many citing this disjunction as a major factor in their high failure rates. In the field of applied linguistics, understandings of the relationship between culture and language led to a view, now widely discredited, of English language teaching in developing countries as an imperialistic venture. A recent major proponent of this view, Phillipson, argued that the teaching and learning of English in such contexts imposed new 'mental structures' (Phillipson, 1992:166). Others (e.g. Canagarajah, 1999; Clayton, 1998, 2000; Conrad, 1996; Pennycook, 1994) have contested the notion that values are transferred via language teaching on the grounds that it overlooks the power of human agency to subvert and convert dominant ideologies in ways that reflect 'individual and collective aspirations and constraints' (Clayton, 2000:22). In the context of this debate, the 90's saw much questioning of the ideological underpinnings of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

The body of knowledge in relation to CLT continues to grow as examples of its redefinition in individual classrooms appear in the literature. In contrast, there has been very little discussion relating to the West's most recent educational export – the competency-based approach, which evolved to serve today's neo-liberal economic agenda. The competency-based approach at the centre of this study involved an English language curriculum for Lao government officials. As a curriculum, its underpinning values potentially have a more pervasive influence on educational practice than does the individual classroom-based practice of CLT. Consequently, this study of the appropriateness of a competency-based curriculum contributes to understandings of 'how power and agency interconnect to promote social practices ... that represent both the condition and the outcome of domination and contestation' (Giroux, 2001:72).

The critical analysis of the project itself is fundamental to understanding how development donors exert power through projects. The stated purpose of this particular English language project was to enable Lao government officials to 'interact effectively with donors and investors and undertake [their] ASEAN commitments' (AusAID, 2001a). A normalising agenda can be seen in this goal. However, the responses of government officials involved in this study – well accustomed to adapting to changing world power structures and their attendant languages – demonstrate their view of the acquisition of English as a tool for



empowerment: a tool which would enable them to take charge of, or at least participate in, a dialogue about their country's development. Through a critical evaluation of the project design, and the responses of Lao individuals involved in this project, I argue that by failing to respond appropriately to the existing and changing socio-political and cultural context, AusAID contributed to the limitation of that empowerment and thus to the maintenance of the unequal balance of power.

Ultimately, all three levels of analysis contribute to an understanding of how the dominant development discourse works to limit the ability of the recipients of international development assistance, like the Lao, to articulate their own body of knowledge of what is appropriate in their context. In turn, the Lao responses, which take the form of a series of stories around central themes of acceptability, commitment and disjunction, reveal how the agency of politically and culturally aware individuals 'indigenise and appropriate, negotiate and ... resist' (Ang, 1998:102) an imported set of values. Ultimately, the responses of Lao individuals involved in this study offer a glimpse of what Tu Wei-ming (2000) has referred to as other possible 'multiple modernities' when he vigorously joined other voices (e.g. Sardar, 1997, 1999; Schweder, 2000; Sen, 2004; Tucker, 1997a; Tucker, 1999) in contesting that to 'develop' necessarily implies the adoption of Western cultural values and practices as espoused in the 'traditional' view of development and recently reiterated by prominent development economists (cf. Harrison & Huntington, 2000).

The foundations of ethnic Lao cultural values and practices, of their worldview, are described in **Chapter 2**. Based primarily on the work of Stuart-Fox (1996; 1997; 1998), the pre-colonial socio-political organisation of the Lao is revealed to have been a flexible polity with a hierarchical system legitimated by Buddhism-fused-with-animism notions of karma and reciprocity. Acknowledging Stuart-Fox's (1998) argument that the once-powerful Lao 'Kingdom' of Lan Xang is the historical precursor of the modern state of Laos, the chapter traces the persistent threads of the ethnic Lao worldview in the history of the Lao path to modernity since the notion was introduced during the French era<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The name 'Laos' dates only from the colonial era, being the name the French gave to the nation state they created. While acknowledging this fact, and its limitations, in this study I refer to the country as 'Laos' to emphasise the dynamic continuity of the worldview of the ethnic Lao threading through their pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial history. I have, however, referred to the Lao PDR when it has been necessary to distinguish or emphasise this particular political moment in time.

The cultural examination is based on a dialogic understanding of culture and its transformative possibilities. As Perez de Cuellar reminds us:

No culture is hermetically sealed. All cultures are influenced by and in turn influence other cultures. Nor is any culture changeless, invariant or static. All cultures are in a state of constant flux, driven by both internal and external forces (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:24).

Drawing on the literature, a picture is painted of a culture in which, over the years, the ‘past [has been] reinterpreted to conform to present reality’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1966:182) but continues to incorporate a respect for hierarchy and reciprocal relationships accompanied by a preference for cooperation over competition as taught through Buddhism and a socialisation process valuing harmonious group relationships. My purpose is to emphasise that the cultural foundations of the ethnic Lao stem from a historical tradition, resulting in social institutions – such as education and the family – exemplifying beliefs and values not necessarily in accord with those of the dominant development discourse and its colonial precursors. Examples are cited of the conflicting priorities of French and Lao worldviews, and in so doing, the chapter introduces the theme of disjunction which reverberates throughout this study.

The French officially underpinned their colonial activities with a *mission civilisatrice*, i.e. a mission to change their colonised lands and subjects to reflect their own recently formed image of a modern nation. However, during their time in Laos, as in Cambodia (cf. Ayers, 2000), they neglected to establish the infrastructure – the scaffolding – of modernity, instead focussing their efforts on their more economically profitable colony, Vietnam. The legacies of this disjunction constitute the sub-theme of Chapter 2 because of their relevance to the Lao English language teachers involved in the LEFAP project, the government officials who were their students, the program administrators and, ultimately, the present government’s goal of leaving the ranks of least developed countries by the year 2020 (State Planning Committee, 1996). Through an examination of the recent events, including the nation’s changing language policies that led to the introduction of the LEFAP project, the chapter reveals a fundamental disjunction between Lao and donor plans.

The theme of disjunction is further developed in **Chapter 3**, which introduces the key theme of agency. The chapter elaborates on the arguments surrounding the dominant development discourse with the intention of ‘understanding and rendering visible how Western knowledge is encased in historical and institutional structures

that both privilege and exclude particular readings, voices, aesthetics, authority, representations, and forms of sociality' (Giroux, 1992:26). Drawing on the literature, the chapter argues that the articulated rationale of the post-war 'development' era was at odds with the political motivations behind its launch. Using Lao and other examples, the chapter explores how pressures applied to further the dominant powers' self-interested economic agenda leaves little room for developing countries to articulate their own priorities.

The chapter then examines the arguments for and against the notion that educational development assistance and the teaching of English are tools for maintaining economic domination by inculcating the 'appropriate' cultural values for development to occur. However, the role of the agency of politically and culturally aware individuals in subverting the imposition of values leads to arguments for reimagining development as 'cultural freedom', so that, as Perez de Cuéllar states, it 'embraces not only access to goods and services but also the opportunity to choose a full, satisfying, valuable and valued way of living together' (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996). Such views lead to the proposition that rather than the Eurocentric model of development being the 'sole "motor" for progressive historical change in the world' (Ang, 1998:87), there are alternative paths which 'consider people's values, ideas and beliefs, their identity and feelings, how they view the world and their place in it, and what is meaningful to them' (Tucker: 1997:4). The chapter concludes by considering agency and the possibility of 'multiple modernities' (Tu Wei-ming, 2000) in relation to the socio-cultural appropriateness, and hence the sustainability, of the particular educational change project at the centre of this study.

Some of the dimensions of these multiple modernities are captured in the replacement of the hammer and sickle with the revered Buddhist monument, the *That Luang* stupa, on the Lao national emblem, following the demise of the Soviet Union. This and other graphic representations of how the Lao view the world and their place in it are presented in '**Imag(in)ing Laos**'<sup>3</sup>, a pictorial interlude positioned between Chapters 3 and 4, which adds to the montage of 'different voices, different perspectives, points of view, angles of vision' (Denzin, 1997:5) and helps to set the scene for the narratives that follow.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Imag(in)ing' is borrowed from Greg Gow (1999), who used the term in his PhD thesis on the Oromo in Melbourne.

The narrative account of the implementation of the Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) project is told in **Chapter 4**, from my point of view as an advisor on the project. Beginning with a snapshot of the English Language Resource Centre (ELRC) where I was based, the chapter turns to a critical analysis of the stated project outputs in terms of their pedagogical soundness and their appropriateness for the socio-political and cultural reality as I observed it. The narrative, which includes extracts from my field journal, continues with a description of the decisions made by the implementing team to overcome the disjunctions: decisions which added considerably to the work to be completed within the specified time-frame but which the implementing team of Australian advisors and Lao counterparts considered necessary for the Lao context.

The narrative elaborates on how, while labouring to establish as culturally appropriate an English language program as possible, I continued to harbour reservations about the appropriateness of a competency-based curriculum. It details how, in the early days of implementation, I observed how the competency-based approach provided teachers with profound insights into teaching and learning. However, as implementation progressed, a crack in the system was revealed during a visit to a classroom. With the appearance of this crack, my concerns about the appropriateness in Laos of the competency-based approach resurfaced, along with concerns about the appropriateness of the decisions we had made and their relationship to the sustainability of the program. It was these concerns that led me to embark on this study.

With the linkage between appropriateness and sustainability as my primary focus, the evolution of my thinking on the research I was to undertake is narrated in **Chapter 5**. While waiting for official permission to undertake my field work, the chapter narrates how I opted for the term ‘stakeholders’ to describe the Lao participants in my research, drawing primarily on the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu’s (1977; 1990a; 1993; 1992) notions of reflexive agency and transformative capacity. Returning to the project design document, I critically assessed AusAID’s approach to defining and measuring sustainability in relation to the literature on the transfer and sustainability of educational models in general, and English language teaching projects in particular. In so doing, I refined my thinking on what I would eventually be investigating and planned two stages of fieldwork to be undertaken eighteen months apart.

Convinced that it is Lao perceptions of the acceptability of the educational program which would ultimately determine its sustainability, I decided that my research should focus on the views of Lao stakeholders, and that participant observation would be the most fruitful methodology to access those views. Nonetheless, I remained acutely aware of the impact, whatever the methodology, of the unequal power relationship between Western researcher and Lao stakeholder on the value and the validity of research findings. As the chapter indicates, I resolved the dilemma in terms of the postmodern position that, as researcher/writer, my role is not to claim objective truth for my representations of Lao stakeholder views, but, rather, to mediate between those views as I understand them and the imagination of my readers (Denzin, 1997; Goodman, 1998; Wolf, 1992).

While my voice was dominant in Chapters 4 and 5, the next two chapters listen more acutely to Lao individuals. As support for my research came through the Lao Ministry of Education, my access to provincial programs was far greater than it was to programs in the capital. Consequently, the data I was able to collect was richer in the provinces than in Vientiane. While I was initially concerned that this would skew my findings, the provincial focus proved to be appropriate because of the decentralisation process taking place at the time of the project implementation and both of the stages of subsequent research in the field.

The first of the chapters focussing on Lao responses, **Chapter 6**, explores the stakeholders' experiences of the educational and political change at the time when AusAID funding was drawing to a close. The Lao stakeholder responses are woven into stories exploring acceptability and commitment, and elaborate on the disjunction between project design and socio-political reality. The analysis of the stories reveals that Lao perceptions of acceptability involved a complex interrelation of political, cultural, pedagogic and pragmatic considerations which had yet to be resolved. Moreover, while the project design document identified three risks to sustainability, the analysis reveals that the interdependence of these risks defies the document's simplistic delineation of responsibilities for risk mitigation. The disjunctions between Lao stakeholders' commitment to the fulfilment of their post-project responsibilities and the adequacy of the project design to build capacity to do so suggest that, as the project neared its date of completion, the institutionalisation of the program was in a precarious position. The situation exposes the disjunctions between rhetoric and reality, thereby bringing AusAID's commitment to sustainability into question.

The outcomes of these disjunctions form the central themes of the stories presented in **Chapter 7**, which are reconstructed from investigations undertaken when I returned to Laos for the second stage of research eighteen months after AusAID funding had ceased. The first story contextualises the accelerated pace of change that had taken place since my first research stage. It deals with the disjunction between AusAID's focus on the capital city and the Lao priority focus on the provinces because of the Lao government's implementation of its decentralisation decree. Numerical data add to the Lao voices, revealing that AusAID's refusal to respond flexibly to the changing political reality had resulted in a wastage of project resources. Subsequent stories reveal how the inflexibility of the project design failed to adequately support the decentralisation process. In these stories, Lao voices describe the successes and struggles involved in their endeavours to provide a quality English language program in provincial locations after the project had left them inadequately equipped to do so.

The strength of the Lao conviction that English is a necessity for the implementation of their development program is evidenced in these struggles and confirmed through the words of students and ex-students of the program. It is evidenced in the efforts of provincial administrators to not only maintain the program but also extend it to more adequately meet the needs of their officials so that they might express their country's priorities on development assistance projects and in regional forums. Through the Lao stories it is revealed how AusAID's intractable belief in the efficacy of its project design constrains their ability to do so.

The final story in Chapter 7 deals with the disjunction between the competency-based approach itself and Lao cultural expectations. Students added their voices to those of teachers and some administrators previously heard expressing appreciation for the pedagogical benefits of the approach. However, investigations also revealed a continuing reluctance amongst many Lao teachers and administrators to 'strictly' apply the competency-based procedures because of a cultural preference for collective harmony and face-saving. At this point we hear of the emergence of a Middle Way Solution which, from the Lao point of view, reconciled the disjunction between the 'foreigner' way and the Lao way.

**Chapter 8** draws together the threads of the three levels of analysis of appropriateness in relation to sustainability. The discussion centres on the emergence of the Middle Way Solution as, on the one hand, exemplifying the role of agency in

reconciling the values underlying the competency-based approach, and, on the other hand, highlighting the development discourse's limitation of that agency. It invites those of us involved in development work to reflexively re-evaluate our own involvement in the limitation of choice and voice. It invites us to engage with 'Other ways of knowing, being and doing' (Sardar, 1999:60) and to recognise our own cultural construction of knowledge. Ultimately, the Middle Way Solution offers a glimpse of one of the possible 'multiple modernities' envisaged by Tu Wei-ming (2000) and others contesting the dominant development discourse.

Arriving at the point where it is possible to glimpse this alternative way of knowing has been made possible by the presentation of stories – my story of working on the project and of embarking on the research, and my rendition of Lao stories of their experiences of the project. My hope is that these stories

provide powerful insights into the lived experiences of others in ways that can inform, awaken and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes that they may not be consciously aware of. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement unacceptable and seek to change the situation (Sparkes, 1998a:80).

To assist in the evocation of these 'lived experiences', each of the eight chapters in this thesis begins with a 'snapshot' – a short descriptive passage, a recollection of events – such as the one that began this chapter. Each snapshot (which after the first one focus on Lao lives and Lao experiences) relates to the chapter it introduces, so that, for example, the passage that fronts the next chapter (depicting the socio-historical context into which the project was introduced) presents a 'snapshot' of the life of a Lao woman in reference to historical changes that affected her life as a language teacher<sup>4</sup>. The purpose of the snapshots and journal entries is to contribute to the validity of this thesis by adding to the description within the chapters, thereby providing a 'scaffolding upon which [readers] react and generate their own ideas on a particular finding' (Goodman, 1998:57). However, they remain, as Geertz (1988:145) reminds us, 'the describer's descriptions, not those of the described'.

On that note, I invite the reader to embark on the narrative that begins in the next chapter with an exploration of the socio-political and cultural foundations of the ethnic Lao worldview. The narrative continues through subsequent chapters,

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms have been used in the snapshots and when individuals are referred to in the stories told by Lao individuals.

illuminating the constraints to Lao efforts to articulate their own views of what is appropriate for their context, and ends in a Middle Way Solution grounded in alternative ways of knowing, being and doing.



## Chapter 2: Meuang Lao and modernity

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### *A snapshot of flexibility*

*Achan (Teacher) Manivanh is the oldest of six children of a farming family in Vientiane Province. Because she liked to learn, an aunt took her to live with her in Vientiane city where she could attend secondary school. None of her brothers or sisters studied further than sixth grade. As this was during the time of the Americans, her schooling was in Lao but she studied both French and English. After graduating from secondary school, she went to Teachers College to study French then she got a French scholarship to study in Paris. Imagine her pride!*

*She was there in 1975 when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party established the new regime. She and her husband-to-be answered the call to return home to help the revolution, unlike some of their peers who chose exile and stayed behind. She went to work in a school and her husband joined a government department. Times were hard. Not long after her first child was born, she was offered a scholarship to retrain in East Germany. It was an opportunity she could not refuse and so she left the baby behind and 'cried and cried' all the time she was away. On her return she taught German in a secondary school for a number of years but, predicting how things were shaping up, retrained again as an English teacher.*

*By the time the winds of change swept through, she was ready to step in as one of the country's first English language teachers outside of the teacher training college where she had studied. Her English then was very rudimentary but over the years she took every opportunity to hone her skills. One of those opportunities was a scholarship to Australia. This was her third retraining in a third language in a third foreign country. Mirroring the changing times of her country, she has continually adapted.*

*She now holds a position of responsibility in her profession. As the eldest and only educated one amongst her siblings, she also has responsibilities to her extended family – to her brothers and sisters and their families. She says her times abroad have changed her: she refuses to help one family member who constantly gets into gambling debt. She sighs as she tells me, "Some people think I'm too hard. It's not the Lao way". Like her aunt before her, though, she has taken a promising niece to live with her so she can go to high school in Vientiane.*

## **Situating Lao modernity**

When the heroes of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party established their government in 1975 they believed that through socialist revolution they could build a modern technologically advanced state (Stuart-Fox, 1996:181). Their vision was founded on notions of the modern nation-state first introduced when the French colonised the region they named *Indo Chine*. This chapter explores the development of modernity from these colonial beginnings, and its evolution through the Lao state's turbulent recent history. Certain aspects of 'the modern' are of particular relevance to the English language teachers involved in the AusAID-funded Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) project, as well as to the officials they teach whose task it is to manage the country's development. Accordingly, this chapter will focus on the development of the nation's education system, administrative skills and physical infrastructure. Also relevant to this study are changes in policy and practice introduced by the Lao authorities as they have adapted to changing circumstances, and struggled to achieve the modernisation goals articulated by the Party 30 years ago. Among these, the changing foreign language policies, the changed attitudes of the Lao authorities to the accessing of information, and the decentralisation policy announced in 2000 are especially relevant.

An examination of these and other factors will locate the LEFAP project within the current but changing Lao socio-political context and acknowledge the historical forces which have both shaped and constrained the Lao PDR's goal of building a modern state. To fully appreciate present-day Laos, it is necessary to understand 'pre-modern' Laos and, in particular, the Kingdom of Lan Xang, which Stuart-Fox has argued 'established for the Lao an historical identity that has endured through more turbulent times to undergird the present Lao state' (Stuart-Fox, 1998:58). Consequently, this chapter begins with a brief examination of the pre-colonial socio-political organisation of the ethnic Lao, i.e. the ethnic group which 'has been and still remains, politically and historically dominant' (Stuart-Fox, 1986:44) in this multiethnic, multilingual nation.

## **Pre-colonial Lao society: Meuang Lao**

Before the advent of the French into their world, the socio-political organisation of the Lao was structured around the *meuang*. This is a term which can best be translated here as 'district' although it can also mean 'country' and at times

‘town’. Having no direct translation in English, it reflects the differing Western (fixed) and Lao (flexible) perspectives on the organisation of society. The Lao socio-political organisation developed from clan-based to a hierarchical system in which an hereditary elite ruled over a free peasantry in multiple centres of power (Stuart-Fox, 1996:3). The term ‘mandala’ is now widely used to describe this characteristically Tai<sup>5</sup> power structure once prevalent in mainland Southeast Asia. Over time, the size of the mandalas increased while the numbers decreased as ‘strategically located mandalas consolidate[d] and expand[ed] their power by drawing into their tributary reach regional rulers who had themselves built their power in a similar way’ (Stuart-Fox, 1998:15).

The mandala system was underpinned by Lao religious beliefs, described by Stuart-Fox (1998:69) as ‘a uniquely Lao worldview’ of Theravada Buddhism fused with the pre-existing animist *phi meuang* cult. The animist spirits (*phi*) are believed by the Lao to exist in a hierarchical ranking that spreads throughout the Lao Buddhist world (i.e. across existing national borders). The *phi* nevertheless operate within their own clearly defined boundaries with the dominant *phi*, the *phi meuang*, commanding a network of spirits in surrounding villages (*phi ban*), each of which commands the household spirits (*phi heuan*) within their respective villages (Vistarini, 1986:70-75). Thus the animist *phi* world both reflects and protects the socio-political organisation of the *meuang*.

The worldly hierarchy was legitimated by religious rituals and validated by the Buddhist notion of *karma*, or the accumulation of merit through good deeds. The centrality of *karma* to the Lao mandala system of socio-political organisation has been explained by Stuart-Fox (1996:4) as follows:

the popular notion of karma (moral destiny) endowed kings and rulers with the moral right to govern. To have arrived at the top of any local hierarchy of power was never accidental: it was the function of positive karma accumulated through the merit of former existences. Karma determined individual circumstances – enlightenment or power; Buddha or cakravartin (universal ruler). Just as every man (if not woman) was potentially a Buddha, so every ruler was potentially a cakravartin. To recognise superior

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<sup>5</sup> The Lao belong to the Tai-speaking language group which includes not only the Tai-Lao of north-eastern Thailand, but also the Tai-Shan of north-eastern Burma, the Tai-Yuan of northern Thailand, and the Tai-Siam of central Thailand (Stuart-Fox, 1998:22).

power was to recognise superior merit. Tribute from one ruler to another gave formal expression of that recognition.

Within the mandala system the people were ‘remarkably free to conduct their own local affairs in exchange for allegiance, tribute, and manpower in the event of war ... [to the] central power of the mandala of which they formed a part’ (Stuart-Fox, 1998:145). The obligation, however, did not flow in one direction only. The Buddhist concept of *Paticca Samuppada* (Dependent Origination) from which the notion of karma flows, teaches that all things are related in an interdependent and interconnected network (Ruberu, 2002:217). Accordingly, in return for tribute and respect, the people received protection and favour. The political organisation of the mandala was thus held together by the mutual obligation of a patron-client system, the power relationships of which were reproduced at all levels of the hierarchy and within each circle of power, i.e. within each village, within each collection of villages (*meuang*) and between the centre of the mandala and each *meuang* (Stuart-Fox, 1998:14). However, the relationships were not necessarily fixed and enduring as local rulers (*chao meuang*) on the periphery of a mandala might change allegiance depending on the circumstances of the times (Stuart-Fox, 1997:11). Consequently, the borders of a mandala were also not fixed, as they are in the modern state, but could wax and wane over time as it became more expedient for a local ruler to pay tribute (in exchange for protection and favour) to one rather than the other, depending on the prevailing power ratios. Within this fluidity, the underpinning constancy was the reciprocity of the patron-client system validated by karma.

Under this system grew the greatest of Lao mandalas – the ‘kingdom’ of *Lan Xang Hom Khao* (Million Elephants and the White Parasol) – which by the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, led by ‘King’ (*chao sivit*) Fa Ngum, based in Luang Prabang, incorporated the Lao peoples living in territories extending far beyond the borders of present day Laos (Stuart-Fox, 1998). This, then, was a *Meuang Lao* – a ‘Land of the Lao’ – in a sense approximating the English term ‘nation’, which, Stuart-Fox argues, is the ‘historical precursor of the modern Lao state’ (Stuart-Fox, 1998:143). Through the karma of the rulers and the appropriate propitiation of the *phi*, the Lan Xang mandala united a widely scattered people for three and a half centuries.

By the time of the French arrival in the late 1800s it had disintegrated into three smaller mandalas – one centred in (present-day) northern Laos, one in central Laos, and one in southern Laos (Stuart-Fox, 1998:103), although the total land mass

of their territories was more extensive than that occupied by the current Lao nation (cf. map in Stuart-Fox, 1998:104). These three mandala were at one time or another paying tribute to either or both Bangkok or Hue as they sought to counterbalance the power of the two forces dominating the region in an effort to maintain independence (Stuart-Fox, 1996:8). The French, having colonised Vietnam, misunderstood the nature of the mandala view of statehood by taking the then current Siamese superiority at face value and had, by 1909, reached agreement with the powerful Bangkok Tai to draw the boundaries of both kingdoms, Siam and Laos. In so doing they left a far greater number of ethnic Lao across the Mekong in Siam than in Laos (Ngaosyvathn & Ngaosyvathn, 1994:49; Stuart-Fox, 1998:143). In a further distortion of the mandala view of statehood, and an imposition of their own cultural view, the French elevated the *chao sivit* of Luang Prabang, to be the ‘King’ of the newly formed nation<sup>6</sup>. However, with the annexing of more land to Cambodia, this *Meuang Lao* was, according to Armand Tournier, the first French Resident in Vientiane, ‘about one third of the area of the countries known under the name of the Laotian principalities [i.e. the three mandalas in northern, central and southern Laos] and it [was] the less rich and inhabited part of these territories’ (quoted in Ngaosyvathn & Ngaosyvathn, 1994:51). Thus, the Lao were dealt a poor hand when the French imposed their Eurocentric view of ‘nation’ as delineated by fixed borders. This was an inauspicious beginning on which to found a nation, and one which, as we will see, was little improved by the ‘benign neglect’ that characterised the French colonial period in Laos despite the espoused ideology of the *mission civilisatrice* – the self-righteous belief in the benefits of bringing ‘civilisation’ to the ‘natives’.

## French colonialism and Lao modernity

The French concept of nationhood has its roots in the European Enlightenment and the Revolutionary values of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*. This era engendered new beliefs such as the superiority of technology and scientific methods, the valuing of rationality over the superstitious (the ‘death of religion’), and the belief in ‘progress’. These beliefs and values ‘gave rise to new institutions and practices –

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart-Fox (1996:35) makes the point that the southern provinces of Laos, although delineated by the French as Laos, were not formally included as part of the kingdom until 1945 when Prince Pethsarat ‘took advantage of the political vacuum created by the Japanese surrender not only to reiterate Lao independence but also to proclaim the unity of the Lao state’.

forms of democracy, educational institutions, political parties and movements, nation-states' (Birch et al., 2001:29). In the nineteenth century, French nationhood was a concept embraced by urban Parisians but not by the 'peasants in rural areas who refused to speak French, who did not see themselves as Frenchmen and who clung to local customs and "superstitions"' (Evans, 2002:42). Thus, at the time of the French colonisation of *Indo Chine*, the process of building the modern nation on their home territory, of constructing the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) of French citizens out of a diverse, multilingual group, was an unfinished project. Nevertheless, the French, along with other European 'nations', introduced their notions of a modern society to those they colonised. Accordingly, the French introduced the Western European idea of modernity to Laos. Or rather, members of the French urban minority introduced the idea, which was then adopted and adapted by an ethnic Lao urban minority within the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual 'Laos' the French had created.

The French in Laos experienced much frustration with some of the 'non-modern' practices they encountered but could not understand. Grant Evans describes one such difficulty in relation to the approaches of the two cultures to the collection of taxes:

the grass roots structure relied on the traditional administrative system, which was a patron-client system not a rule governed bureaucracy that in theory applied itself evenly and impersonally everywhere. Among the Lao, personal relations had to be finessed at every level from the ban (village) to the tasseng (collection of several villages) to the muang [district]. This alone ensured the practice would not be uniform (Evans, 2002:51).

To the French, the Lao patron-client system would have seemed arbitrary and irrational – a non-system, in fact. However, as Weber pointed out, 'all kinds of practical ethics which are systematically and unambiguously oriented to fixed goals ... are rational' (Gerth & Wright Mills, 1948:294), and so, for the Lao, what the French saw as 'abuse and corruption was in fact the workings of the system they relied on, and [the French] insistence on the application of the law uniformly was an irritant' (Evans, 2002:51).

Modernising, i.e. changing such systems so they conformed to the Western view of rational, came to be viewed as a moral imperative with many colonisers assuming a duty to bring 'civilisation' to the 'savages' they colonised. For the French, their *mission civilisatrice* came to be seen as a prime motivation for their colonial exploits, although, as Vistarini's (1994) examination of French colonial texts

demonstrates, other forces – the desire for national and/or personal prestige, wealth and adventure – were also driving the colonisers. Indeed, the *mission civilisatrice* in Laos was secondary to French aspirations in Vietnam with its large potential labour force and access to sea trade. French interest in Laos was ‘primarily as a resource-rich hinterland for Vietnamese settlement and French exploitation’ (Stuart-Fox, 1997:20). Consequently, the colonial period in Laos was characterised by ‘benign neglect’ during which

the French did virtually nothing either to encourage economic development or to improve social welfare. Ninety per cent of the population remained subsistence farmers; there was no industry and a small tin-mining venture benefited only the French company involved and its Vietnamese workers (Stuart-Fox, 1986:16).

With its view of Laos primarily as a resource-rich hinterland for Vietnamese settlement and Lao exploitation, it is not surprising that France’s greatest effort went into major infrastructure development in the form of roads to facilitate trade. ‘Constructed at great cost and labour, these were to “unblock” Laos by linking the Mekong towns [of Thakek, Savannahket and Luang Prabang] to coastal Vietnam’ (Stuart-Fox, 1997:47). These Mekong towns were also eventually linked to each other by a road which, starting in Saigon, ran through Cambodia and from there followed the Mekong north to Vientiane before cutting through the mountains to reach Luang Prabang (Stuart-Fox, 1997:47-48). These roads have remained the backbone of the Lao road transport system, which now, as then, link the major urban centres but leave the vast proportion of the mountainous and densely forested country inaccessible to motorised transport.

As well as importing Vietnamese labourers, the French also staffed their administrative system in Laos with Vietnamese. A school for training Lao administrators was not established until 1928, and in 1937 nearly half the ‘indigenous’ positions within the colonial bureaucracy were still held by Vietnamese (Evans, 2002:47). The resultant lack of administrative skills amongst the Lao had a significant impact on self-governance when the Royal Lao Government was established a decade later (Evans, 2002:94). Similarly, and in accord with their primary motivations, educating the population was not a priority for the French. Primary education continued in the main to be conducted by monks as it had before the French (Evans, 2002:71). While members of the aristocracy were provided with post-primary education in Vietnam or France, it was not until 1925 that a local

secondary school was established in Vientiane; and over the next 30 years four more were built in the provincial administrative capitals along the Mekong – Pakse (Champasak Province), Luang Prabang, Savannakhet<sup>7</sup> and Thakek (Khamouan Province) (Vistarini, 1978:5). These schools provided an education no higher than middle school and followed the French curriculum, which was not adapted in any way to the Lao context and was, moreover, delivered in the French language. Consequently, it was accessible only to the elite minority. (Stuart-Fox, 1986; Vistarini, 1978). By 1946, when Laos became nominally independent of France, these schools were providing an education for just 2% of the population (ADB, 1993:3).

It was from amongst the educated elite, however, that an independence movement slowly grew. Thus, ironically, a movement formed to resist the modernisers was the culminating triumph of the of the French *mission civilisatrice* in *Indo Chine*. Over time, having been exposed through schooling and politics to European notions of the workings of the modern state and national identity, certain members of the traditional elite again gathered strength (Evans, 2002:73). Spurred on by ‘the challenge of a stridently Thai nationalism in the 1930s’ (Evans, 2002:39), and Japanese wartime occupation in the 1940s, an independence movement emerged which eventually solidified into an armed resistance – the *Pathet Lao*. Founded in 1950 in northern Vietnam and, guided by the communist principles of the Indo-Chinese national fronts, it was allied with the Viet Minh in the struggle to oust the French from the region. The *Pathet Lao* was a diverse group incorporating ethnic groups living in the highlands and on mountain slopes as well as members of the royal family along with a predominantly little educated ‘proletariat’ lowland Lao group. Here the hereditary elite among the ethnic Lao held nominal power but the real power was in the hands of others (Khaione and Nuhak) with Vietnamese connections and with strong connections to the Indo Chinese Communist Party (Stuart-Fox, 1996:53-54). Thus, the traditionally dominant ethnic group, the Lao, remained dominant but the traditional elite within that group did not.

The French finally withdrew from *Indo Chine* in 1954 after their defeat at the hands of the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. The eviction of the French, however, was not the end of the struggle. Despite Lao attempts, in true Buddhist

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<sup>7</sup> The name of the capital of Savannakhet Province was since changed from Savannakhet (city) to Khanthabouli.



fashion, to find a “middle way” by establishing coalition governments (in 1957, 1962 and 1974) (Stuart-Fox, 1996:37), the anti-communist drive of the United States of America (USA) ensured that these attempts were doomed. When the French withdrew, the USA stepped in to prop up the Royal Lao Government against the communist *Pathet Lao* and their allies in Vietnam (Stuart-Fox, 1996:41); and Laos, still a land of predominantly subsistence farmers, was inexorably, although secretly (cf. Hamilton-Meritt, 1992), drawn into the modern warfare of what is regionally known as the American war.

## **US imperialism and Lao modernity**

During the ‘American era’ Laos was a country divided into three areas – the region around Vientiane controlled by the USA-backed Royal Lao Government, the ‘liberated zones’ in the north controlled by the *Pathet Lao* with assistance from socialist sources, and the disputed regions of central and southern Laos (Luther, 1983:7). With rural Laos sustaining massive bombing<sup>8</sup>, it was, inevitably, a time of huge social upheaval with displacement of families and whole communities. Thousands of people from the northern province of Xiengkhouang were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in Vientiane when the province became a buffer zone between the opposing forces. Throughout the length of the country, peasants living in the mountains forming the border with Vietnam were forced to vacate their land as the US sought to destroy the Ho Chi Minh trail. To this day, in spite of numerous foreign aid projects aimed at finding and destroying unexploded ordinances, farmers and children in these areas continue to be maimed as they go about their daily lives.

The Americans, like the French before them, viewed Laos in terms of its usefulness to its interests in Vietnam. Consequently, the establishment of the infrastructure of a nation state focussed on the development of physical infrastructure to assist its war on communism – the construction of air fields and the establishment of telecommunication links between the main urban centres (Evans, 2002:151). With this agenda, education was of secondary importance, just as it had been to the French in the colonial era. However, primary schooling slowly expanded in the urban areas to 433 public schools and 76 private schools by 1972 (ADB, 1993:3) – three times the

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<sup>8</sup> Dommen (1985:90) writes, ‘By 1975, the USA had dropped more than 2,000,000 tons of bombs on this tiny, poverty stricken country – approximately the same amount its forces had dropped in Europe and the Pacific during the Second World War’.

number towards the end of the colonial era. Secondary schooling continued as it had under the French until 1967 when United States (US) aid financed five secondary schools (named *Fa Ngum* schools, after the founder of the Kingdom of Lan Xang) in the administrative centres of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, Pakse and Phone Hong, the administrative centre of Vientiane Province (Dommen, 1985; Vistarini, 1978). For the first time, the language of instruction was Lao, and therefore accessible to greater numbers of the population. The curriculum was a balance of vocational and academic education, but did not take into account the 'economic reality of Lao' (Vistarini, 1978:6) and was, as a consequence, unsustainable once US aid was unavailable. The US aid program also funded teacher training programs. Despite these expanded opportunities, research by Vistarini demonstrated that 88.7% of the students within the education system were urban ethnic Lao. As a result, 'the elitism introduced and perpetuated by the French was largely unchanged by an influx of Americans' (Vistarini, 1978:7).

The perpetuation of an urban elite was aided by the American policy (and its biggest expenditure) of propping up the government by paying the salaries of its soldiers, policemen, teachers and civil servants (Evans, 2002:102) rather than in instituting 'good governance', which may have been achieved with the Lao attempts at coalition governments. The result of the influx of American dollars, according to Dommen (1985:139), was 'the emergence of a consumer-oriented society in the main towns' with 'the growth of occupations and groups associated with a middle class ... [and] a small intelligentsia emerged, newly returned from overseas studies'. At the same time, 'the careless dispensation of American aid' caused 'corruption and wealth disparities [and] serious political rifts in Laos' (Evans, 2002:103). These manifestations of wealth disparity brought with them a concomitant concern for moral welfare and the traditional values of Lao culture. Ironically, the influx of US dollars also had the effect of increasingly undermining the authority of the Royal Lao Government because

the bond between governing and governed, or between centralised state and decentralised local power, rested traditionally on payment of tribute and the reciprocal obligations that entailed. Failure to impose and collect a land tax, and the one-way flow of US development aid, freed rural communities of any obligation towards the central government and any expectation in return (Stuart-Fox, 1997:130).

In contrast, in the *Pathet Lao* 'liberated zones' the people's loyalty was harnessed through 'membership of village associations and contributions of rice in support of national goals proclaimed by leaders to whom they felt themselves closely bound in a common struggle' (Stuart-Fox, 1997:130). In these zones, the *Pathet Lao* had been developing an alternative education system since 1955 which aimed to 'inculcate the Marxist-Leninist philosophy, promote national ideals and provide practical training for active life' (Vistarini, 1978:16). By 1970, there were reported to be in the liberated zones 2000 primary schools with an enrolment of 69,000 students, 70 'ethnic minority' schools with an enrolment of 2,000 students, two high schools and two teacher training institutions, as well as short courses for adults in which some 60,000 people were reported to have enrolled (Vistarini, 1978:17). It was the first opportunity for both adults and children in these regions to learn to read and write and the enrolment figures vastly outnumber those of the US-backed urban areas, despite the difficulties of life in the buffer-zone of civil and international war.

## **Modernisation through socialism**

The war in Laos ended in 1975, when the communists won the day in Vietnam and the Americans withdrew from the region. Without the American dollars, the Royal Lao Government soon collapsed (Stuart-Fox, 1996:85) and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party proclaimed the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). With the forced abdication of King Savang Vatthana<sup>9</sup> the new regime set about forging a new social order.

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party vowed to modernise Laos by 'advanc[ing], step by step, to socialism without going through the stage of capitalist development' (Foreign Broadcasts Information Service, quoted in Stuart-Fox, 1986:35). The Party leadership acknowledged that as there was no heavy industry and no working class in Laos there were few guidelines for embarking on this path. Kaysone Phomvihane, freedom fighter, revolutionary hero and the new regime's first Prime Minister stated:

The advance to socialism from a small farmers' natural economy of self-sufficiency and self-support is a very new path almost

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<sup>9</sup> The fate of the king and some members of the royal family is a state secret which has recently been researched by Kremmer (2003). His well-researched account is marred by his demonisation of anyone associated with the present communist regime described, for example, as 'tough opportunistic commissars' displaying 'rat cunning'.

without any precedent in the world. It must go through various intermediary steps of transition, and must be a long one full of difficulties and hardships (quoted in Luther, 1983:1).

This bold plan was to be implemented not only in a subsistence economy but also in a country described by Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn (1994:54) as ‘exhausted by war and marred by secular underdevelopment’. The self-sufficiency of at least a third of the farming population had been severely disrupted by bombing during the war years and so ‘the resettlement and economic integration of these displaced people became both the major challenge and a costly necessity of the new socialist state’ (Luther, 1983:7). The situation was not helped by the prolonged drought that ravaged the country. The lack of agricultural surplus, caused by the weather and the displacement of approximately one third of the rural population, meant that in the first few years ‘the government could not collect significant taxes from the peasants, which also meant no government funds [were] available for public works like irrigation and other development projects’ (Luther, 1983:25).

Exacerbating these difficulties, the loss of the American dollars that had previously propped up the economy, coupled with the new regime’s early Marxist-Leninist zeal (most notably ‘re-education’ or *samana*) led to a mass exodus of the elite and the educated. According to Stuart-Fox (1986:53), those who left included ‘not only almost all professionally qualified doctors, engineers, managers and administrators, but also a large proportion of its mechanics, tradesmen and artisans.’ One of the results was that in the early years of the Lao PDR, ‘many development projects could not be satisfactorily completed because of the lack of skilled labour’ (ADB, 2000:1). Lack of skills and lack of funds saw the already limited physical infrastructure fall into disrepair<sup>10</sup>. Administrative positions had to be filled ‘by inexperienced peasant-soldiers from the northern regions’ which caused ‘difficulties in establishing reliable institutions and an administration ... capable of implementing the new economic policy’ (Luther, 1983:10).

Since its inauspicious beginnings, the Lao path to modernisation has taken many turns characterised by a number of changes in policy as the government has tried to find its way through the unmapped territory described by its leader as ‘almost

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<sup>10</sup> In 1994, Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn noted that ‘roads are inadequate for internal use, even to forward emergency food assistance outside the towns bordering the Mekong River. Trucks can carry rice at speeds of only 10-15 miles per hour (16-24 km/h) because of poor roads or lack of roads’ (1994:34).

without any precedent in the world'<sup>11</sup>. An early policy shift involved the official attitude towards religion. According to Evans (1998:73), the 'cultural milieu in which the communists were operating could not abide ... sharp and uncompromising distinctions between "science" and "superstition"'. As a result, although Buddhism initially lost its status as a state religion and essentially animistic rituals were suppressed, by the early 1980s close government control began to relax. Evans (1998:63) considers this to have been precipitated to a large extent by 'an accumulating existential crisis within the Lao leadership'. Consequently, as early as Lao New Year 1980, Lao political leaders attended a (Buddhist-infused, essentially animist) baci ritual, thus sending a 'signal to people at large that the baci/sou khouan was a legitimate practice' (Evans, 1998). The funeral, in 1984, of Prince Souvannah Phouma – advisor to the president – saw him accorded full Buddhist rites, as was President Kaysone, himself, on his death in 1992 (Evans, 1998:64). By 1995, as proclaimed at a major meeting, Buddhism and Lao culture were considered to be inseparable (Evans, 1998:66) and monks were championed as being cultural leaders (Evans, 1998:67).

Another significant policy change was that of the introduction in 1986 of the 'New Economic Mechanism' (*Kon Kai Seth Tha Keat Mai*) which signalled the beginning of the Lao PDR's transition away from a command economy. The adoption of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) has been a slow and cautious process beset by struggles between the hard-liners and the pragmatists within the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. Gunn (1998:147-148) notes that in 1987 Prime Minister Khaisone Phomvihane, the revolutionary hero, is reported to have admonished those colleagues in the Central Party Committee who had 'adhered to the old way of thinking' urging them instead to embrace the 'new way of thinking'. Some ministers are reported to have threatened to resign 'if the private sector and market forces assumed a hegemonic role in the less centrally planned economy now envisaged'.

The collapse of the Lao PDR's chief benefactor, the Soviet Union, in 1990 precipitated a significant change in direction with the Lao government turning to the regional capitalist nations of ASEAN and to the West for the economic assistance and

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<sup>11</sup> Luther (1983:29) considered that in the context of socialism in a subsistence economy, Laos was 'probably a unique case and cannot be compared with the Soviet Union, China, North Korea or even Vietnam'. (Emphasis in the original.)

investment it needed to fund its development program. In the mid 90s, this change was symbolised graphically by the replacing of the hammer and sickle on the national emblem with the most revered Buddhist monument of the region, *That Luang*.

One of the Lao government's initial reactions to the collapse of the Soviet Union was the decision that, 'while the private sector dimensions of the NEM were appropriate, the decentralisation dimensions were not appropriate' (Viallancourt, 2001:9). Recentralising decision-making at this time was perhaps perceived to be necessary in order to navigate this major change. Since that time, there have been gradual moves towards reinstating decentralisation, or 'deconcentration' as the Lao government prefers to call it. In 1996, for example, AusAID noted in its Lao country environment profile that, 'while overall policies are being centralised, implementation is being decentralised to provinces and districts' (AusAID, 1996:18). One can assume that such moves were not without difficulties as, in the same year, when the Lao PDR's first constitution was published it included a commitment to the principle of democratic centralism (National Assembly, 1996:4). Nevertheless, 'deconcentration' took on a new impetus in March 2000 with the issuing of Prime Ministerial advice that, rather than all decisions being made at central level, the provinces were to become strategic units, the districts were to become budget planning units, and the villages were to become implementation units (Prime Minister Sisavath Keobounphanh, 2000) (see Appendix 1). As this thesis will demonstrate, this was to have far reaching effects on the modernisation process, on the motivations of those who guide it and, consequently, on the specific English language program for government officials at the heart of this research.

While these changes in direction were taking place, the socialist government remained committed to the provision of mass education, and Chagnon and Rumpf (1982:163) report that the expansion of educational opportunities was one of the most popular and welcome changes cited by people from a range of ethnic groups. It was not possible, however, in the face of the diminution of an already minimal pool of teachers, for the Lao government to provide quality education for younger generations. An Asian Development Bank (ADB) report explains the measures taken to implement the goal of education for the masses:

To meet the shortage of teachers, a number of measures were taken – anyone who could read and write was inducted as a teacher of primary schools or adult literacy classes, inadequately trained primary school teachers were promoted to teach in lower

secondary schools, teacher training was expanded unevenly in the various provinces ... offering programs of different lengths and requiring a variety of years of schooling (ADB, 1993:17).

While this might be viewed as an admirable attempt to tackle the problem, the increased quantity of teachers was at the expense of quality. This led to the exodus of another wave of urban lowland Lao who were alarmed at the significantly lowered standard of education the new regime was able to provide for their children compared to the education available to them under the Royal Lao Government with the aid of American dollars (Chagnon & Rumpf, 1982:168).

The Lao government attempted to boost its pool of skilled people by sending students abroad to countries offering scholarships. The majority went to Eastern Bloc countries, the Soviet Union being the largest donor of aid to Laos at that time. Zasloff (1991:26) reports that a number of factors severely constrained the success of this plan, including the Lao students' limited basic education and their lack of knowledge of the language of tuition. The difficulties were compounded by the inappropriateness of some of the subject matter to the conditions in Laos. As a result, 'only a few cadres in each ministry [were] capable of implementing management tasks adequately. These few [were] often not available, since there [were] so many demands on their services' (Zasloff, 1991:22). More recently, the Lao government has taken steps to address the problem internally by implementing an educational upgrading program incorporating upper and lower secondary school levels for government officials under 50 years old (see Appendix 2c).

The Lao personnel at the centre of this research – the English language teachers, their government official students, the program administrators and those working directly with the project (the project counterparts) – were from the educated elite. In a country with a labour-force in which 68% have never attended school, the majority of those involved in the project were among the 3% (ADB, 2000:xxii) of the tertiary educated. Nevertheless, as the majority had completed at least part (if not all) of their education since 1975, their knowledge-base was constrained by the quality of that education. Their knowledge-base was also constrained by the government's prolonged firm control of access to information – a policy which has now been largely abandoned.

For years, information came to the population via the government-controlled public address systems in the urban centres and through daily newspapers which

initially focussed on government achievements such as the number of new irrigation channels that had been built. Recently, the press has begun to carry articles praising enterprising citizens who have succeeded in entering the market economy through small scale private enterprise. For example, I recall articles about a farmer who had increased his income by adding a fish pond and some ducks to his rice paddy and about an ex-teacher who was now earning far more than her previous government salary because she had taken the risk and set up a stall selling cooked offal. The appearance of such articles is a significant indication of changing government attitudes towards private income generation.

Until recently, access to either fiction or non-fiction (apart from government reports and school texts) written in the Lao language was virtually non-existent. Books, magazines or videos coming into Laos from Western countries were vetted by the Ministry of Information and Culture. This included English language books being bought with AusAID funding for the English Language Resource Centre in Vientiane (ELRC). On one occasion, the Ministry of Information and Culture objected to the content of one text in an American publication for learning English and ordered it to be taken off the shelves. A compromise was reached, and the ELRC officers were allowed to tear out the offending page.

In the early 1990s some of those living in urban areas were able to generate a little more wealth than previously. In the vicinity of the capital, being the only area with access to electricity, the more affluent and the more enterprising bought televisions – the affluent for their own homes and the enterprising to set up in a shop, cinema-style, for paying customers to watch. Rather than the state-run television, people tuned in to the more entertaining Thai TV. With it came international news.

Access to information, particularly in government departments, is now encouraged with the Lao five year socio-economic plan for the years 1996-2000 stating, 'Modern instruments must be progressively introduced in the State namely the use of computers, facsimile machines, internet information systems and others' (State Planning Committee, 1996). Access to these modern instruments, however, remains limited even in central government departments. It grows increasingly more limited once one leaves the capital, and becomes non-existent outside the other main urban centres because of the absence of the necessary infrastructure. As a result, in 1999 – the year the LEFAP project implementation commenced – there were 9.2 telephones and 2.3 computers per 1000 people (World Bank, 2001). Currently, then, while the



authorities have loosened their control of access to information, it remains severely restricted on the basis of location, financial resources and position within the government hierarchy. Access to the internet – the primary tool used by the ‘developed’ world for accessing global information – is also limited to those with English language skills.

## **The LEFAP project, access to information, and development**

The LEFAP project was designed to assist Laos with its communication needs in the wider world, most particularly, aid donors, foreign investors and the its ASEAN partners (AusAID, 2001a). Laos is a small country with a small population. Its language is not widely spoken in the world, nor is it likely to be. As a consequence, it is the current policy of the Lao government to ‘promote the learning of foreign languages, particularly English, to meet the socio-economic development of the country’ (MOE, 2000-2001). Changing language policies reflect the changes in its international support. Many older government officials speak French, and (as previously noted) prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, many young people, who subsequently became government employees, received their education in the Soviet Union. To facilitate educational opportunity and its anticipated development flow-ons, Russian was widely taught in schools and tertiary institutions. When the Eastern Bloc collapsed there was a change of policy: Russian was no longer a useful language.

I was teaching at the National Polytechnic at the time. The students were given a choice of continuing with Russian, or changing to French or English. The French embassy was determined to maintain its foot in the language door and offered the Polytechnic a language laboratory in exchange for ensuring that French was taught. Nevertheless, this attempted coercion was thwarted when the overwhelming majority of students chose, and most were allowed to study, English. Their choice reflected the trend in Vientiane, where the demand for English outstripped the supply of teachers. In schools, teachers with a modicum of English were co-opted to teach it. Russian language teachers retrained to emerge as English teachers. The English Department at Dong Dok Teacher Training College burgeoned but, without skilled English speakers to staff it, many who graduated did so with poorly developed English language skills.

AusAID assisted by funding the establishment of the English Language Resource Centre (ELRC) in Vientiane in 1993 and, in 1995, mounting the Lao Australia English Language Project (LAELP). This project developed a series of English language text books for secondary schools, and trained teachers to use the books. At the same time, LAELP assisted in the development of provincial English language capacity by setting up (English language) Resource Centres in each of the five provincial teacher training colleges. Cohorts of teachers studied for a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma in English Language Teaching (ELT). These courses, conducted by an Australian university, were tailored to the low skills base of the Lao English language teachers, and while they assisted in upgrading their methodology and language, improvements were relative to the starting point, with the result that overall the English language skills of the country's teachers remained low.

At the same time, the Lao government was concerned not only about the language skills of its future employees but also the language skills of its current government officials, i.e. those responsible for managing country's development process now. This became a minor focus of LAELP, which was chiefly aimed at the introduction of English into schools but also included the establishment of Self Access Centres (within the Resource Centres) for government officials to study English in their free time. For a range of reasons, including the limitations on government officials' free time, this did not meet the needs.

The enormity of its language learning needs became evident when Laos gained ASEAN observer status, three years before gaining full membership in 1997. ASEAN documents are written in English and the hundreds of meetings a year which member countries are obliged to attend are conducted in English. However, a language audit revealed that, of the 300 officials who would be working directly with ASEAN, only 30-50 senior staff and approximately 20 diplomats had sufficient English to effectively carry out their direct-ASEAN duties (MacLeod & Sithirajvongsa, 1997). The report also identified a similar number of administrative support staff as well as over a hundred working in customs and immigration whose work would be affected by ASEAN integration and who would require English.

Prior to the audit, the Lao government had begun to plan for the upgrading of the English language skills of its officials. In October 1996, the Central Party Committee issued a directive that senior leading officials, management officials and technical officials should train in foreign languages, particularly English (MacLeod &

Sithirajvongsa, 1997:54). The Ministry of Education subsequently established a committee for managing these English language training courses (Lao Ministry of Education, 1996, cf. Appendix 2a). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was given responsibility for requesting foreign assistance in organising English language training for the main personnel working with foreigners and those participating in ASEAN work, while the Ministry of Education was charged with the management of any overseas assistance for the English language training of those officials not participating in ASEAN work (Lao Cabinet of the Prime Minister's Office, 1997, cf. Appendix 2b). Ministry training centres were advised to conduct foreign language training and those ministries without training centres were to coordinate with the Ministry of Education in order to provide training (Lao Central Party Committee, 1997, cf. Appendix 2c). This was followed by a directive setting out the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. Among other things, it was stated that 'all Ministries, Equivalent Committees, all Provinces, the Municipality and the Special Zone' would prepare English upgrading plans for their officials, propose and report on them to the Ministry of Education. Any requests for teachers were to be directed to the Ministry of Education (Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1997, cf. Appendix 2d).

The realisation of these plans, however, was hampered by a lack of funds and provision remained scant, although far more extensive in the capital city than in the provinces, few of which managed to mount courses. To assist the provinces, the National University of Laos, a semi-autonomous body associated with the Ministry of Education, established a nine-month course paid for by the respective Provincial Human Resource Departments of the students. The courses were reported to be 'insufficiently customised' (AusAID, 1999b:5). AusAID saw the opportunity to capitalise on its previous English language initiatives and contribute to the integration of Laos into ASEAN, at the same time affording Australia an opportunity to win some much-needed kudos from the ASEAN nations. Accordingly, in 1999, the Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) project was launched.

The AusAID priority, as reflected both in the title and in the project design (which will be detailed in Chapter 4), was for a strong focus on officials engaged, or potentially engaged, in ASEAN work, with a consequent focus on officials in ministries in the capital. Although the design incorporated a focus on five provinces, this was secondary to the project's focus on the capital city. The design did not,

therefore, accord with the Lao government's move towards decentralisation, even though the move was being promoted by other international agencies in the name of good governance. Nor did this focus accord with the Lao government's promotion of English language learning for officials throughout its public service. As a result, the project was characterised by an inherent disjunction between the Lao vision for its development and how to achieve it and the constraints imposed by the more limited donor view. The narrative of the implementation of this project, as a micro-view of the broader development discourse, reveals how the sustainability of development initiatives are constrained not only by such disjunctions but also by a disregard for the socio-political reality, which, in the Lao case, stems partly (but in significant ways) from the legacies the Lao PDR inherited from its colonial and imperial past.

### **The legacies reviewed**

As Prime Minister Khaisone Phomvihane predicted, there were many difficulties in taking the unprecedented path to 'modernisation through socialism' in a subsistence economy, and there is still a considerable distance to be travelled before reaching the goal of leaving the ranks of least developed nations by the year 2020 (State Planning Committee, 1996). In the year 2000, the ADB reported that 'several factors contribute to the current shortage of skilled staff including the relative inexperience of the civil service and the lack of local training opportunities in statistics, budgeting, accounting, economics and management' (ADB, 2000:16). Moreover, while most children now receive some schooling, nearly 50% do not complete primary school as 'the education sector remains inadequately planned, under-financed, and under professionalized' (ADB, 2000:ix). Access to schooling and other facilities such as hospitals, safe drinking water and electricity continue to be constrained by the inadequacy of the road system which for years extended little beyond the grid built by the French and even then fell into disrepair in subsequent years of neglect and turmoil. In 2001, it was reported that the average distance to a main road was over 10 kilometres, with poor households concentrated in areas where infrastructure is the most under developed (Datt & Wang, 2001:22).

These legacies of a rudimentary education system, limited administrative capacity and poorly developed physical infrastructure have direct relevance to the skills and knowledge of the English language teachers involved in the LEFAP project, the administrators of the English language program developed under the project, and

the government officials who were the students in that program. They are relevant not only in terms of personal skills and knowledge, but also because it is these government officials who must manage the country's development process. As this thesis will demonstrate, for the Lao government officials, both the knowledge and technology required for accessing information was considered to be vital for the execution of their duties related to the development of the human and physical infrastructure of a modern nation – however that is conceptualised.

While the French (for ethnocentric reasons) planted the idea of a modern nation, and the United States (for economic reasons) defended the idea, history has left the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and its public service the challenge of attempting to build that nation in their allotted portion of land. It is a portion of mountains and forests with a large number of distinct ethnic groups whose affiliations, like those of the ethnic Lao, cross the imaginary borders of the nation-state. In this difficult situation, the Lao government tried, and then jettisoned, a strict adherence to Marxist-Leninist ideology, demonstrating a degree of flexibility in its policies as it attempts to plot a course along the previously untravelled road.

This flexibility is a reflection of the Buddhist notion of *anicca* (impermanence) which teaches that 'every individual or thing is unstable, temporary and destined to pass away' (Ruberu, 2002:127). It is a current expression of a worldview that created the flexible borders existing before those fixed by the French. As previously described (pages 15-16), the animist spirit world both protected and replicated the *meuang* structure and, together with the Buddhist notion of karma and 'Dependent Origination', endowed those at the top of each hierarchy with the right to rule in a system held together by the interdependent relationships of patron-client networks. Lao Theravada Buddhism (i.e. animist-infused) is now the official state religion. Despite the fears of some commentators in the early days of the Lao PDR that Buddhism and communism were fundamentally incompatible (cf. Dommen, 1985; Stuart-Fox & Bucknell, 1982), the Lao authorities see no contradiction in the integration of socialism and religion<sup>12</sup>. However, with the demise of the traditional elite, 'the past [has been] reinterpreted to conform to the present reality' (Berger &

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<sup>12</sup> Lafont (1982) has argued that, apart from a short aberrant period, the integration of Buddhism and socialism was always the intention of the Pathet Lao, and that before 1975 fears to the contrary were fuelled by US propaganda.

Luckmann, 1966:182), and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has noted that government officials today (some of whom *are* the traditional elite) hold a special position in society, as ‘not only are they the regulators and facilitators of economic and public life as in other societies, but they are, in a sense, the leaders of Lao society’ (DFAT, 1997:240)<sup>13</sup>. Within the new social structure, the patronage system has endured, although the patrons and their clients have changed so that today ‘ties to Party members [have become] an important element of defining new networks of patronage’ (Stuart-Fox, 1996:183). This, of course, is antithetical to the Western definition of ‘good governance’, currently dominating development thought and practice, and upon which much development assistance is conditional.

However, Geddes makes the point that because most Third World communities

have in the past been redistributively organised through patron-client networks, it is natural that impersonalised services should be personalised. For people who have been brought up in Western countries, these developments are unacceptable ... In fact, any personalising of services is, by definition, a corruption of those services to Western industrialised people (Geddes, 1994:137).

Both systems are open to corruption in the sense of an exchange of money for services. However, Geddes dismisses the notion as ‘ethnocentric presumption’ that this is the primary functioning of patron-client systems (Geddes, 1994:136). Instead he describes how they can also ensure that

people of low status are able to gain access to advice, support, guidance and influence, and ... that people of higher status remain socially focussed, recognising a need to retain client support and build a network of patrons of their own (Geddes, 1994:150).

Moreover, Geddes warns that ‘it would be as wrong to champion patron-client relations as ideal forms of relationships between people of different statuses as it is to dismiss them out of hand as corrupt and extortionary’ (Geddes, 1994:151). However, he also warns that ‘if inappropriate forms of reciprocity are built into development schemes, those involved will feel very uncomfortable’ (Geddes, 1994:132).

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<sup>13</sup> Among the public servants I have known, many take their responsibilities to the wider community very seriously. Whether Party members or not, they participate actively in their village communities by, for example, attending meetings to defend women’s traditionally inherited land. One of the first acts of a colleague (not a Party member) on moving to a new village (essentially a new suburb of Vientiane) was to visit the local school to talk to the principal about how the school could play a role in improving the environment, which she found bleak.

Other beliefs and values have also endured throughout the successive influences of French colonialism, American imperialism and Marxism-Leninism. Ngaosyvathn's explanation of the essentially animist *baci* or 'calling of the spirits' ceremony performed widely in homes and workplaces, exemplifies these. She describes the ceremony as

an integral part of the way of life the Lao. It expresses traditional Lao values of avoidance of conflict and aims at promoting consensus within the social fabric and strengthening community ties. As a key element of Lao culture, the ritual is a microcosm of Lao values serving to integrate the individual both spiritually and socially (Ngaosyvathn, 1990:300).

Collective values with the concomitant striving for harmony and 'face saving' are evident in child-rearing practices and through such linguistic items as the kinship terms which extend outside the family into all social transactions, so that a particular person is seen as playing, for example, a father-type role in relation to the wider community and/or in relation to the speaker. These values are also embedded in the school curriculum which emphasises the development of a correct political and social attitude with 'correct social attitude' meaning that 'students should demonstrate a spirit of mutual assistance and cooperation instead of competitiveness, which is regarded as selfish and individualistic' (Ng Shui Meng, 1991:167). One education consultant, who spent some years working in Laos, later wrote about her research into differing perceptions of what is important in children's learning. She commented that 'In England, teachers stressed autonomy, self-expression, and independence, whereas Lao teachers put social values at the top of the list: politeness, caring, and respect for others' (Emblem, 1996:97).

An exploration of the endurance and reiteration of the values which permeated the Lao concept of statehood in the mandala or 'meuang' system, is at the heart of this thesis. They are at the heart of the notion to be explored in the following chapter that modernity can manifest in a plurality of ways, as advocated by those such as Sardar (1997; 1999), Schweder (2000) and Tu Wei-ming (1999; 2000) who contest the view of the dominant development discourse that only the West holds the map to successful development, and that to arrive at the destination requires the abandonment of 'traditional' values and the adoption of those of the West.

## Chapter 3: Development

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### *A snapshot of an English teacher*

*Achan (Teacher) Phonesavanh grew up in Pakxe, the capital of the southernmost province of Champasak, during the time of the American War. When she was in high school she joined other students in barricading the bridge into town against the threatened 'occupation' by the Royal Lao Army. She didn't really understand the politics, but it was exciting.*

*After finishing high school, she went to Dong Dok Teacher Training College near Vientiane to train as a Russian teacher, only to retrain later as an English teacher, like so many of her peers. She's now the main income earner for her family. Her official salary combined with that of her husband amounts to approximately US\$40 a month, but the cost of keeping a daughter at university in Vientiane means the family needs at least US\$250 a month. Achan Phonesavanh makes up the shortfall by teaching extra English classes. She teaches nine hours a week on the 'Normal Course' in her official capacity at the Teacher Training College and eight hours a week on the fee-paying course conducted by the college in the afternoons, plus eight hours on the fee-paying evening course. On top of this, she teaches ten hours a week at a school outside of the college. This is a seven hour face-to-face teaching day – a punishing, but common, load.*

*Nevertheless, she remains interested in her job. When she attended training in Vientiane for an AusAID project, she spent time developing materials to take back to Pakxe with her, along with many ideas for more. She is regretful that these plans haven't come to fruition, but 'I can't do any more than what's in the books', she tells me, 'I don't have the time or the energy. I know it's not the best but I have to earn enough for my family. I just can't do any more'.*

*Achan Phonesavanh is much respected by her colleagues and from time to time is asked by the college to conduct in-service training workshops for other teachers. 'I would really like to get an AusAID scholarship', she tells me, 'to upgrade my knowledge. But I can't, they won't give them to people over forty'. She is shocked to hear that I have a scholarship to do my PhD study. Not only is it difficult for her to imagine that an Australian might need financial assistance, but, as she points out, 'You're older than I am!' 'Yes', I think to myself; 'luckily for me, the Australian government doesn't think its own citizens "too old" after forty'. I think too about how AusAID's age limitation imposes a restriction on the contribution Phonesavanh can make in her workplace despite her capabilities, and willingness, and in contradiction to the desires of her college.*



## **Situating development**

The historical narrative in the previous chapter described how the cultural underpinnings of Lao pre-colonial social organisation continue to influence Lao values and priorities. The valuing of hierarchical relationships but reciprocal and interdependent relationships, arising from Buddhist teachings, are shared by others in the region, albeit enacted in distinctive ways. Sparkes (1998b), for example, has demonstrated how they are currently enacted at family, local and national levels in Thailand. In relation to communities organised around patron-client networks and relationships, Geddes (1994:128) cautions against planning development assistance programs in which people 'must relate to one another as equal, independent individuals'. To do so, he warns, 'ensures that the programs will, in the long run, have to be drastically modified by participants or abandoned'. Recent research into the practice of Cambodian nationals working in foreign non-government development assistance organisations, showed them to be 'struggling to accommodate what is culturally and socially acceptable and expected, and the demands of their work, which, at least in theory, is calling for them to behave in a very different way' (O'Leary & Nee, 2002:v). Such struggles, modifications or abandonments result from the construction of the West as 'the sole "motor" for progressive human change in the world, as the unique bearer of modern civilisation, and as the deliverer of modernity to the rest of the world' (Ang, 1998:87). Westerners have constructed what it means to be either 'developed' or 'underdeveloped', and equate 'development' with 'Westernisation' at both the institutional and individual level (cf. Escobar, 1995a; Munck & O'Hearn, 1999; Sachs, 1992; Tucker, 1997b). From within the ethnocentrism of this construction, development assistance donors and many practitioners have little understanding of, or regard for, the cultural values and priorities of the recipients of the 'assistance'.

Ironically, although the wealth of rich capitalist countries has increased since the concept of 'development assistance' for the 'underdeveloped' was conceived (Sachs, 1992:3), the number of poor countries has been increasing (Luther, 2002). Despite the evidence of the ineffectualness of development assistance in achieving its articulated goals, such is the entrenchment of the dominant discourse with its

hegemonic<sup>14</sup> hold on development thought and practice, that dislodging it has proved difficult. Trapped in the constructed knowledge of the discourse, some prominent development economists have recently advocated that development assistance projects include ‘cultural adjustment programs’, on the grounds that it is the country’s own culture which is to blame for its state of ‘underdevelopment’ (c.f. Harrison & Huntington, 2000).

Such a view is vigorously contested by those who dispute that the provision of the services modern technology can provide necessarily requires the adoption of Western-defined versions of the modern, such as a particular form of democracy and a particular set of economic policies (e.g. Sardar, 1997, 1999; Schweder, 2000; Sen, 2004; Tucker, 1997a; Tucker, 1999). Nor do such opponents accept that, at the individual level, the provision of desirable goods and services can only be achieved through the inculcation of the same set of beliefs and values as espoused by the West (Sardar, 1999; Schweder, 2000; Tu Wei-ming, 1999, 2000). Instead, these critics view development as a freedom to express alternative worldviews; they assert that modernity can be pursued in a multiplicity of ways; and contend that the root cause of the problem is the inappropriateness of this Eurocentric view for the ‘needs and requirements as well as the visions and aspirations of non-western cultures’ (Sardar, 1997:36).

In order to situate this contestation, this chapter begins by tracing how the European concept of modernity (which in the previous chapter was seen to have shaped colonial thought) has continued to permeate the dominant development discourse since the inception of the post-war reconstruction program. Using Lao examples, the chapter examines how this hegemonic view of modernity is enacted in practice at institutional level. It then discusses how development assistance for educational programs, including English language programs, has been viewed by the economically self-interested as a tool for developing Western notions of ‘modernity’ – but also argues that such intent is undermined by the power of human agency. Finally, by arguing that culture and development are inseparable in practice, the chapter elaborates on the possibility of alternative cultural paths to development, and

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<sup>14</sup>. ‘Hegemony’ is used in this study in Gramsci’s (1971) sense of a consensual state having been engineered (in this case) through the construction and propagation of the discourse of development.

links this to the socio-cultural appropriateness, and consequent sustainability, of the particular English language program at the heart of this study.

## **Continuation of colonial thought**

Arturo Escobar's Foucauldian analysis of development, published just over two decades ago, argued that the genealogy of 'development' dates from the European 'discovery' and conquest of 'new worlds'; and that since that time, with the aim of maintaining economic exploitation, strategies have been deployed which have 'systematically sought to create in these new worlds the idea that westernisation (presently along capitalist lines) is a fundamental problem for all societies' (Escobar, 1984:395). The current descendant of this genealogy is the dichotomous notion that countries can be 'developed' or 'underdeveloped' – a terminology with a short history, having been defined as such for the first time in a speech by US President Truman:

We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing (Inaugural Address, quoted in Esteva, 1992:6).

The speech, made at the time when the prime political concern was for the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War, appealed to the benevolence of the victors of war, from which the United States of America had newly emerged as a leading player on the world stage. Within this appeal, the Western liberal beliefs of the Enlightenment featured prominently, the speech being a statement of faith in science and technology as world saviours, and of industrialisation as a path to that salvation through greater production leading to the 'improvement' of an undesirable state of being, i.e. 'underdeveloped'. Thus 'development' 'came to hinge on the certainty of a universal modernity' (Tucker, 1999:7) with 'progress' inexorably linked to economic growth. Truman's words also appealed to the Enlightenment values of 'democracy' and 'fairness' and 'equality'; and attest to a fundamental shift away from colonial attitudes and towards altruistic motivations for involvement with the 'underdeveloped'. However, as in colonial times, there was a disjuncture between the articulated rationale and the motivations of the articulators – even if the motivations were invisible to the protagonists.

Escobar's analysis of the development discourse maintains that the development era was launched because post-war reconstruction was seen as crucial to accessing the raw materials of the colonies of the European powers (Escobar, 1995a:31). However, he asserts, the rapid emergence of the Cold War legitimised the development program to the extent that 'extend[ing] the sphere of political and cultural influence became an end in itself' (Escobar, 1995a:34). As the 'threat' of communism grew, the fight against it became the prime motivation (cf. Esteva, 1992; Robinson & Tarp, 2000:2; Thorbecke, 2000:23) because it was 'commonly accepted in the early 1950s that if poor countries were not rescued from their poverty they would succumb to communism' (Escobar, 1995a:34). Thus, the fight was ideological, involving a struggle for the control of the hearts and minds of peoples. It emanated from the perceived economic threat that if 'underdeveloped' nations 'succumbed' to communism, the result would be a curtailment of access to raw materials.

This economic threat, combined with failure of industrialisation and urbanisation to bring about a concurrent reduction in poverty, ushered in a new era of thought: the Modernisation theories of the 1950s and 1960s, which 'compared traditional and modern societies and traced the development process from traditionalism to modernity' (Cohn, 2000:96). Focussing on perceived deficiencies, the theories emanated from the orthodox liberal conviction (which has again risen to prominence as neoliberalism) that 'development problems in the Third World stem largely from [their] irrational or inefficient policies' and, consequently, the Least Developed Countries 'must replace their traditional values, institutions, and patterns of activity if they are to overcome the obstacles to development' (Cohn, 2000:96). This thinking is exemplified in an early United Nations document outlining the West's vision of desirable change:

There is a sense in which rapid economic progress is impossible without painful adjustments. Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped; old social institutions have to disintegrate; bonds of caste, creed and race have to burst (United Nations, 1951 quoted in Escobar, 1995a).

Over the years, various theories of development have been proposed and a variety of strategies for its achievement vigorously pursued. All 'repeat the same basic truth, namely, that development is about paving the way for the achievement of those conditions that characterise rich societies: industrialization, agricultural modernization, and urbanization' (Escobar, 1995b:214). The tenacity of this view

illustrates the hegemonic hold of the discourse described by Escobar as having ‘colonized reality’ to the extent that it is difficult to recognise the ‘pervasive character and functioning of development as a paradigm of self definition’ (Escobar, 1995b:215). Within this, the dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ – exemplified in the early United Nations pronouncement quoted above – has continued to colonise thinking in spite of the lack of success, and often disastrous results, of such a vision. Nearly 50 years after the United Nations articulated its vision of change, the World Bank’s former chief economist similarly defined development as

... a transformation of society, a movement from traditional relations, traditional ways of thinking, traditional ways of dealing with health and education, traditional methods of production to more modern ways (Stiglitz, 1998).

Thus, as in colonial times, to be ‘civilised’ – renamed as ‘modern’ or ‘developed’ – is construed as ‘Westernised’ at both the institutional and the individual level.

### **‘Modernisation’ at institutional level**

From the outset, development was equated with economic growth. This definable, measurable, ‘scientific’ goal was to be achieved by travelling through inevitable stages of social evolution. This is epitomised in the United Nations classifications of ‘Highly Developed’, ‘Developed’, ‘Less Developed’ and ‘Least Developed’ nations, with levels of industrialisation acting as the benchmarks for categorisation. This evolutionary perspective was held in common with Marxism, the chosen path of the Lao PDR, Marxist theory also being a ‘legitimate heir to the Enlightenment tradition’ (Munck, 1999:197), or, as Nederveen Pieterse (1991:22) has described it, ‘another Western developmentalist discourse from the same civilizational family’. Both perspectives were ‘variations on a theme’ of ‘economism, centrism and teleology’ (Nederveen Pieterse, 1991:15).

From the orthodox liberal perspective, development was to be achieved by following the same path as those at the pinnacle of development – the advanced capitalist nations – had taken beforehand. In reality, following the same path would be an impossibility given the historical, political and social-cultural circumstances that enabled firstly the rise and then the spread and strengthening of Western capitalism. Indeed, as was pointed out in the late 60s, ‘If the now underdeveloped were really to follow the stages of growth of the now developed ones, they would have to find still other peoples to exploit ... as the now developed countries did before them’ (Frank,

1969, quoted in Nederveen Pieterse, 1991:14). Instead, Chang (2002) has persuasively argued, over the years developing nations have been urged to, or coerced into, ‘modernising’ their institutions so that they conform to whichever Western-defined versions of ‘good’ economic policy were prominent at the time. The last couple of decades have been dominated by the ideology of neoliberalism, a fundamentally economistic view of society that ‘celebrates a ruthless competitive individualism’ (Giroux, 2004:xvii) which ‘expands its reach to include all aspects of social life within the dictates and values of a market-driven economy’ (Giroux, 2004:xxii). Re-embracing the deficit model of the earlier Modernisation theorists, much pressure has been applied on aid-recipient countries to transform their societies by implementing ‘structural adjustment strategies’ such as privatisation and deregulation in return for aid (Cohn, 2000; Klitgaard, 1991). Currently, the ‘issue of institutional development, under the slogan of ‘good governance’ has ... come to occupy centre stage of the development policy debate’ (Chang, 2002:69). It is, as Jones (1997:127) has noted, ‘the latest ideological stance’. This normalisation agenda for the governing institutions of aid-recipient nations reflects not only the dominant West’s belief in the superiority of its own knowledge and culturally-constructed practices, but also the economic self-interest inherent in development assistance.

Economic self-interest is acknowledged in AusAID’s strategy paper for development cooperation in Laos, which refers to future benefits to Australia through ‘opportunities for expanding Australia’s commercial links’ – providing the infrastructure can be improved – because Laos has ‘substantial hydro-electricity generating potential, major forest resources, a relatively cheap (though unskilled) labour force and significant mineral resources’ (AusAID, 1999a:8-9). The building of the Friendship (*Mitthaparp*) Bridge across the Mekong River (creating the first road link between Laos and Thailand) is an example of AusAID’s contribution to the fostering of a market economy and an environment conducive to foreign investment. Cornford (1999:4) has argued that, in building the bridge, the Australian government ‘thrust itself forward as a high profile advocate of the Western liberal economic order, promoting the bridge as both a symbol and an agent of economic forces that would purportedly bring prosperity to Laos’. The promotion of the economic agenda can also be seen in the joint World Bank-AusAID Land Titling Project in Laos because, as Cornford (1999:5) reminds us, ‘the development of a workable and transparent market for land is vital for attracting future foreign investment and maximising

market integration'. The project at the centre of this current study, the AusAID-sponsored Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) project, is a further example. AusAID's normalisation agenda can be seen in the project's aim of facilitating the Lao PDR's integration into not only ASEAN but also liberal economic organisations such as the World Trade Organisation.

In the case of the LEFAP project, the provision of English classes for its government officials was the Lao government's own priority for development, and it had actively sought international assistance in this regard (cf. Chapter 2, page 31). However, in 1994, already threatened by a pan-Thai discourse of historic supremacy and cultural superiority, the socio-cultural benefits of the opening of the Mittapharp Bridge were less evident to the Lao authorities than were its economic ones, and their initial cautious response was to restrict its opening hours. In explanation of this caution, Stuart-Fox (1997:204-205) wrote:

While the prospect of being drawn ever more closely into an increasingly integrated region was welcomed by many Lao as a stimulus to the country's own economic development, others expressed disquiet over the effect this might have on the Lao environment, culture and way of life. In part this disquiet reflected legitimate concerns, over such problems as the impact of heavy tourist traffic on Lao towns and the spread of HIV/AIDS; in part it reflected fear that the sense of Lao national identity was still too weak, and Lao culture insufficiently resilient, to withstand the social and cultural pressures that would inevitably accompany the process.

Grant Evans reports that Politburo member, Phoumi Vongvichit, told him that 'while he saw the bridge as a sign of modernization, he also saw it as a conduit for bad cultural influences and for AIDS' (Evans, 1998:132). A Trade and Tourism authority is reported to have explained Lao caution with the words 'We must move slowly ... We have to first evaluate how the bridge affects life before allowing more traffic from Thailand ... We must be careful to preserve the Lao way of life' (quoted in Gluckman, 1996:37).

That way of life was put at risk by the Land Titling project, which imposed a Western commercial concept on the traditional ethnic Lao system of land transfer from mother to youngest daughter for whom it has been customary to continue living in the family home in order to look after the parents in their old age. In the early years of the project, through cultural ethnocentrism on the part of the donor agencies and foreign advisors and lack of understanding of what was occurring on the part of the

Lao population, women lost their ownership. Although Lao decrees governing the registration process specified following customary law, the forms for registering ownership asked for the name of the head of the household. Since men have traditionally dealt with officialdom, their names went on the forms as owners of the land (Viravong, 1999:158-161). In this instance, the Lao Women's Union mobilised to educate women of the implications of not having one's name on a property title.

Both the Mitthaparp Bridge and the Land Titling project can be seen as an example of how, in accepting Western aid after the demise of the Soviet Union, Laos was also forced 'to accept the kind of market-oriented reforms demanded by the donor community, especially multilateral donors' (Bourdet, 1997:145). This has resulted in there being little room for the articulation of the developing country's own priorities. For example, one current mainstream development strategy is to focus on the alleviation of poverty. It heads the United Nations' list of Millennium Development Goals and so, by the year 2015 'all 191 United Nations member states have pledged' to 'eradicate extreme poverty and hunger' (United Nations, 2000). Consequently, 'poverty alleviation' is AusAID's 'central integrating factor' (AusAID, 2001b). In contrast, according to a report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Vientiane, for reasons of nation-building, the Lao government 'prefers to emphasise stimulating growth in the rural economy, rather than dwelling on inequality and on the poor as a specific social category' (Morton Jerve, 2001:282). As a result of these apparently conflicting priorities (which could be seen as more a matter of terminology and emphasis) the Lao government was unable to persuade donors to fund its rural development policies (Morton Jerve, 2001:284).

To take another Lao example of differing priorities, this time relating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education: English was introduced into some Lao secondary schools in the mid-1990s through an AusAID-funded project. For a number of reasons the provision is very shaky. Recently, a senior administrator in the Lao Ministry of Education told me that the Ministry had been thinking of introducing English into Primary schools. When I suggested it might be better to fix up some of the problems with English at secondary level, the administrator replied that, while that was what they would prefer, donors were not interested in looking at secondary schools. Instead, because of the Millennium Goals, donors were only interested in basic education. Consequently, the



Lao Ministry of Education was hoping to strengthen the English language skills of secondary students by providing tuition in the primary sector.

### **‘Modernisation’ at individual level**

Three decades ago, Carnoy’s (1974) historical analysis argued that the establishment of educational institutions in non-industrialised nations by the ‘developed’ nations was geared towards controlling social change and maintaining their own economic dominance. Focussing primarily on the United States, the dominant post-war advocate of capitalism around the world, Carnoy maintained that educational development assistance programs were a combination of humanitarianism and promotion of economic development consistent with the needs of capitalists (Carnoy, 1974:311). Thinking on how this was to be achieved changed over time so that, while initially it was ‘confined to an elite supportive of US-style development’, by the late 1950s schooling ‘was rediscovered as to be a social investment which created a modern labor force with modern “attitudes” towards technological and social change’ (Carnoy, 1974:316). At a basic level this includes the inculcation of the Western capitalist concept of time, i.e. one that was not related to the seasons but one that involves the punctuality and regularity necessary for consistent industrial production. This was reinforced in the 1960s when foreign investors ‘were increasingly shifting into manufacturing in underdeveloped countries ... [and] pushing for expanded technical higher education to supply their labor needs’ (Carnoy, 1974:317).

More recently, other scholars, in particular Phillip Jones (1992; 1995; 1997; 1998), have argued that hegemony persists in the basic education focus currently promulgated by multilateral organisations and development assistance agencies. Following the 1990 Education for All Conference in Jomtien, Thailand, assistance for basic education increased significantly because it provides, as Kiernan (2000:198) describes it, ‘that magical number of years (as few and as inexpensive as possible) which would transform an individual into a useful member of society’, or rather, a useful member of a liberal economic global market economy. The World Bank, followed by other development agencies, claims that basic education is ‘a key to the other poverty alleviation-related goals, given education’s powerful impact on ... fertility rates, nutrition, child and infant mortality, reproductive health’ (World Bank, 2005). While this patently overlooks, for example, the impact of primary health care

education programs for adults, as Jones points out the claims for basic education have allowed the Bank to follow a dual path of promoting poverty alleviation as a strategy while pushing ahead with its 'programme of global economic integration' (Jones, 1997:126) through its basic education strategy.

In the case of Laos, the focus on basic education, at least statistically, has been successful, with 81.8% of primary aged children enrolled in 1991 (World Bank, 2001) and, between 1999 and 2001, the building of 300 more primary schools, the training of approximately 1000 more primary teachers and the enrolment of 20,000 more students (MOE, 2001). However, improvement in access to primary education has been at the expense of investment at the secondary level, where class sizes have burgeoned to impossible numbers. For example, when English was introduced to Lao secondary schools in the mid-1990s, there were often what we (Westerners) perceived to be 'big classes' of 40 students. Now classrooms around Vientiane are crammed with 80-90 students. Teachers complain they cannot attend properly to the learning of students, students at the back of the room complain they cannot hear the teacher, and parents worry. Donor neglect of the consequences of their statistically successful primary educational focus has serious implications for the development of a local educated stratum to staff the civil service. This will ensure the continuation of the French and American legacies (cf. Chapter 2) and ultimately limit the Lao PDR's own development goals.

Paralleling the literature on educational imperialism, a number of scholars have examined if, and how, foreign language teaching contributes to the hegemony of the dominant powers. Phillipson (1992:10), who examined the teaching of English from the World Systems perspective of core and periphery nations, maintains that 'English is in fact a cornerstone of the global capitalist system'. He demonstrates, as does Pennycook (1994), that a policy of linguistic imperialism has been actively pursued by the British Council and the United States for political and economic reasons. Pennycook (1994:149) cites the British Council report of 1968-69 as arguing that 'we should welcome [the spread of English] as furthering English as the language of international commercial promotion, opening the world more readily to our salesmen'. He quotes Winston Churchill as saying 'I am very much interested in the

question of Basic English.<sup>15</sup> The widespread use of this would be a gain to us far more durable and fruitful than the annexation of great provinces' (Pennycook, 1994:130).

Phillipson, however, viewed the spread of English as more insidious than a merely linguistic tool for the furthering of commercial interests. Drawing on the notion of the inseparability of language and culture, Phillipson (1992:166), maintained that the spread of English serves the 'modernisation equals Westernisation' paradigm by imposing new 'mental structures'. His views were highly influential in raising the possibility of linguistic imperialism and fomenting debate around the issue, as a result of which they have attracted widespread criticism (cf. Canagarajah, 1999; Clayton, 2000; Conrad, 1996; Pennycook, 1994; Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1996). Canagarajah (1999:42), for example, contested Phillipson's arguments on the grounds that what was missing from his macro-perspective was the 'lived culture and everyday experience of periphery communities' and how the English language classroom 'can itself function as a site of resistance against the values and pedagogical practices from the centre'. Similarly, Clayton contested the linguistic imperialism viewpoint on the grounds that 'it is untenable to suggest that students, teachers, administrators and policy makers in peripheral nations fail to recognise the hegemony implicit in educational assistance and, thus mystified, absorb ideologies that position themselves and their nations for international exploitation' (Clayton, 1998:495). It is more reasonable, he goes on to suggest, 'to assume that peripheral educators ... are cognisant of hegemony to a greater or lesser degree and that their responses ... are informed by their aspirations and constraints in relation to emancipation, self-interest, and survival'. In a direct response to Phillipson, Clayton argues that the dominant ideologies inherent in a language are not 'mindlessly internalised' and concludes that 'while nations exist in exploitative, class-like relations in a global-level system ... [and] educational assistance [is] involved in the establishment and maintenance of these relations' [the deterministic view of educational and linguistic imperialism] 'obscures a complex interrelationship between structure and agency' (Clayton, 2000:21). His words thus echo the critical

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<sup>15</sup> BASIC English, an acronym standing for British American Scientific and Commercial, was developed in 1930 and, while remaining 'normal English' was composed of a limited number of words and selected grammar (Pennycook, 1994:129).

development view, encapsulated in Ang's (1998:102) contention, that 'these traditional "other" cultures do not absorb "Western" culture passively but actively indigenize and appropriate, negotiate and sometimes resist its forms and practices'.

Drawing together the notion of agency and the examples of conflicting donor and Lao priorities provided in the previous section, we can conclude that the unequal power relationships in the development 'partnership' exemplify the lack of acknowledgement on the part of the donors that the Lao, and nationals of other countries, bring to the partnership their own body of knowledge of what is appropriate, what is valued and what has priority in their context. As a consequence, the unequal power relationships entrenched in, and perpetuated by, the development industry, limit the capacity of developing countries 'to articulate their own identities and worldviews' (Tucker, 1999:13) in the face of the assumption that development equals modernisation at both institutional and individual levels. At the same time, we can also conclude that while Lao articulation of their worldview may be thus limited, the hegemony of the development discourse is in turn limited by the power of Lao agents to make choices within the on-going production and reproduction of self and society.

### **'Cultural adjustment': Proponents and opponents**

The inseparability of the institutional and the individual in this continual cultural production and reproduction was elaborated, in relation to the ethnic Lao, in the previous chapter. The narrative of historical events described how the cultural values of the pre-colonial ethnic Lao gave rise to, and were reinforced by, particular forms of socio-political organisation, which over the years have been both reproduced and transformed. That narrative, along with this chapter's discussions of modernisation at institutional and individual levels, are relevant to a current argument in the literature about the role of culture in development. The argument divides those who view 'development and the economy as part of, or an aspect of, a people's culture' (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:24) and those who consider their worldview should be adopted by, or even forced upon, others in the belief that development is being blocked by 'traditional' culture.

In the last two decades, in recognition of (and opposition to) this ethnocentrism, commentators have been drawing attention to the need for development agencies and practitioners to pay more attention to the culture of the

developing country. In 1988, at the launch of the World Decade for Cultural Development, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, observed that failures of development efforts could be attributed to the underestimation of 'the importance of the human factor – that complex web of relationships and beliefs, values and motivations, which lie at the heart of a culture' (reported in World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:7). Towards the end of the World Decade for Cultural Development, Pérez de Cuéllar, as President of the World Commission, emphasised this with the words:

The challenge to humanity is to adopt new ways of thinking, new ways of living. The challenge is also to promote different paths of development, informed by a recognition of how cultural factors shape the way in which societies conceive their own futures and choose the means to attain these futures (President's foreword in World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:7).

The challenge is also an admonishment of the development discourse's ethnocentrism, with the use of the word 'humanity' in the first sentence highly significant in this context. Through the use of this single lexical change, Pérez de Cuéllar is applying the challenge to *all* nations: the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped'. It fundamentally turns the meaning of 'development' away from the mainstream view as articulated by the 'modernists', who would have written 'traditional cultures' or perhaps 'underdeveloped nations'. His message to the politicians, the economists and to all those involved in the development industry is that there is no One Way, or, in Lyotard's terms, there is no 'grand narrative' of development.

It appears, however, to remain difficult for many to accept this challenge. One reason for this is the complexity of the concept of 'culture' itself, which some consider 'difficult to deal with intellectually because there are problems of definition and measurement and because cause-and-effect relationships between culture and other variables like policies, institutions and economic development run in both directions' (Harrison, 2000a:xxxii). Consequently, it is safe to assume that its very complexity and subjectivity is anathema to many people imbued in the scientific tradition of the Enlightenment – people who consequently prefer applying a tangible, 'objective' approach to their tasks with its compilation of, and reliance on, statistics and numbers. Indeed, confessions are on record from within the profession that 'economists are notoriously uninterested in how people actually think or feel'

(Fairbanks, 2000:272, quoting Krugman, whom he describes as 'the most influential economist in the world today').

Another reason is the non-reflexive belief in the efficacy of their own model of modernity that leaves policy-makers, economists and others in the wider field of development with no reason to contemplate other ways of acting. This is clearly demonstrated in a recent influential but pernicious publication, 'Culture matters: How values shape human progress', in which the cultural deficit model reigns supreme with many contributors arguing that development assistance needs to include 'cultural adjustment' programs (cf. Etounga-Manguelle, 2000), reminiscent of economic 'structural adjustment' programs.

To justify their view of culture, the contributors cite Weber's (1930) seminal work on Protestantism in Western Europe and the rise of capitalism. The contributors see this as a causal link and conclude that the Protestant values of 'hard work, honesty, seriousness, the thrifty use of money and time' (Landes, 2000:11) are necessary for economic development along with competition, individualism, questioning, innovation and risk-taking. They assert that these are the values of a culture that 'favours economic development' while other cultures with other values 'resist' it (Grondona, 2000). These are the values, the contributors argue, of 'progressive cultures' that others need to acquire if they are also to progress (Harrison, 2000b). From this, they conclude that there is a need to change people's 'mental models' (Fairbanks, 2000; Grondona, 2000; Lindsay, 2000) through 'cultural adjustment' programs (Etounga-Manguelle, 2000).

Voices have been raised in opposition to this view. Amartya Sen, for example, dismisses the belief that 'the fates of countries are effectively *sealed* by the nature of their respective cultures' as 'not only a heroic oversimplification, but it would entail some assignment of hopelessness to countries that are seen as having the "wrong" kind of culture'. Sen goes on to declare, 'this is not just politically and ethically repulsive but ... also epistemic nonsense' (Sen, 2004:38). Sen himself views the ultimate purpose of development as an expansion of freedoms for which technology and modernisation may be a means but are not, in themselves, the ends (Sen, 1999). The idea of development as freedom is also the central concept in the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development (1996:15), which states that development 'embraces not only access to goods and services but also the opportunity to choose a full, satisfying, valuable and valued way of living together'. In the light of

the individualism promoted through Western domination, the report also makes an important distinction between individual freedom and the currently threatened collective or cultural freedom:

Cultural freedom, unlike individual freedom, is a collective freedom. It refers to the right of a group of people to follow a way of life of its choice. Cultural freedom guarantees freedom as a whole. It protects not only the group but also the rights of every individual within it. ... Cultural freedom leaves us free to meet one of the most basic needs, the need to define our own basic needs. This need is now threatened by both global pressures and global neglect (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:15)

On these bases, the report joins others (Schweder, 2000; Sen, 2004; Tu Wei-ming, 2000) in countering the 'cultural adjustment' proponents' view of culture as an instrument that can be tinkered with for optimum performance – an instrument which can help or hinder economic growth. The report argues that 'surely, what we have reason to value – the last court of appeal – must itself be a matter of culture. ... Hence we cannot reduce culture only to a subsidiary position as a mere promoter of economic growth' (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:23). Reminding the reader of the dialogic nature of culture, which is constituted within, through and across societies, the report also emphasises that forces for cultural change can be 'accommodating, harmonious, benign and based on voluntary actions, or they may be involuntary, the result of violent conflict, force, domination and the exercise of illegitimate power' (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:54).

Domination and control, this chapter has argued, are entrenched in the culture of mainstream development, in which development 'poses as a form of globalised knowledge claiming universal validity over submerged and localised forms of knowledge' (Tucker, 1997a:11). The calls for 'cultural adjustment' programs emphasise the extent to which practitioners, with all good intentions, non-reflexively engage in that domination, which acts 'not so much by repression but by normalisation; not by ignorance but by controlled knowledge; not by humanitarian concern but by the bureaucratization of social action' (Escobar, 1995a:53).

## **Alternative cultural paths to development**

In recent years, the success of the 'Asian Tigers' has provided a weapon to counter this arrogant and hegemonic cultural stance. Tu Wei-ming (2000:262-264), for example, refutes the 'cultural adjustment' proponents' citation of 'Protestant

values' by citing 'Confucian values' as equally facilitating modernisation. He argues that East Asian modernisation is built on the values of 'sympathy, distributive justice, duty consciousness, ritual, public-spiritedness, and group orientation' rather than on the value Western European capitalist countries place on the individual (with his/her individual rights and equality). He points to the family as the core unit of society where reciprocal responsibilities are paramount in a hierarchical structure. He asserts that the strength of the modern Confucian nation lies in the 'dynamic interplay between family and state' and its 'image of the family as a microcosm of the state and the ideal of the state as an enlargement of the family'. Tu Wei-ming sees both Confucian and Western modernities as being examples of a number of possible modernities. In his view, the 'success of Confucian East Asia in becoming fully modernized without being thoroughly westernized clearly indicates that modernization may assume different cultural forms' (Tu Wei-ming, 2000:264). He has also noted the profound 'significance of the contribution of Confucian ethics to the rise of industrial East Asia, for the possible emergence of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic forms of modernity' (Tu Wei-ming, 1999:4). Similarly, Sardar, drawing on Islamic values, also envisages a pluralistic understanding of development and offers this vision for the future:

The future itself will not be dominated by the single, global civilisation of the west, but by a number of different civilisations ... In a multi-civilisational world, the west would not only lose its power to define and enforce definitions of what it means to be free, civilised, rational etc. on the non-west, but each non-western civilisation would rediscover and put into practice its own way of knowing, being and doing (Sardar, 1997:36).

The possibility of multiple modernities, combined with the role of agency in undermining hegemony, suggest the need to more fully understand the link between sustainability of development initiatives and the cultural values and priorities of the recipients of development assistance. Such understandings have relevance for the socio-cultural appropriateness and, consequently, the sustainability of the competency-based English language curriculum at the centre of this study. The patron-client system – considered the anathema to Western notions of 'good governance' – along with the individualism inherent in Western educational models, are particularly relevant to this study of the responses of Lao government employees studying in, teaching, or administering the program. It is relevant to both the Lao



workplace and the functioning of the program. In later chapters, a range of these Lao voices will tell of their struggles to resolve the conflicting calls on their priorities.

Both this chapter and the previous one have provided a framework for analysing the sustainability of the initiatives of the Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) project within the specific context of Lao development and within the broader context of the development discourse. The discourse has ‘fostered a way of conceiving social life as a technical problem, as a matter of rational decision and management to be entrusted to that group of people – the development professionals – whose specialised knowledge allegedly qualified them for the task’ (Escobar, 1995a:52). The application of this specialised knowledge – the design and implementation of the LEFAP project – is considered in the next chapter, which is preceded by a pictorial interlude that helps to establish the context for the project implementation and the Lao responses to it.

## Imag(in)ing Laos



Imagined into being by European colonial powers, nation states usurped the pre-existing flexible and dynamic polities of mainland Southeast Asia. The fixed borders of the nation-state cartography thus reflect the imposition of a particular worldview on the region. The French, mistaking the then-present for the permanent, confined 'Laos' to a small and impoverished portion of the lands inhabited by ethnic Lao (cf. page 17).

The parcel of land known as Laos has long been considered disadvantaged by its landlocked position in Southeast Asia. Recently, as its road network is developed and extended, disadvantage has been transformed into advantage: landlocked has become 'land-linked' in order to capitalise on the increasing trade and tourism in the region.



*The Mittapharp Bridge*

The transformation began in 1994 with the opening of the Friendship (*Mittapharp*) Bridge across the Mekong River, joining Laos to Thailand by road for the first time. Received cautiously at first by Lao authorities as they gauged its effect on Lao life and culture (cf. Chapter 3), the idea has since been wholeheartedly embraced, with another bridge now open in Champasak Province and, at the time of this research, a third eagerly awaited in Savannakhet Province (cf. Chapter 7). Significantly increasing trade and tourism, the redefinition of Laos as land-linked, along with its greatly expanded air-links, is accompanied by an increased need for English and other languages. As a senior official in Champasak Province explained, 'Champasak Province is already a transit province and soon many more border checkpoints will open. We already have visa-on-arrival at the airport. In 2003, Wat Phu will become a World Heritage site. We will provide eco-tourism and heritage tourism. To provide services we need languages, especially English ... But English is very new for our officials' (Administrator 10).

In 1996, the Lao government issued a directive that all senior officials under the age of fifty should know another language, with priority given to English, which is considered an important tool for the management of the Lao development process. In 1999, AusAID responded to the Lao government's requests for assistance by establishing the LEFAP project (cf. Chapter 2).



*Lao government officials take part in a discussion task in a provincial English for Lao Government Officials class, developed and implemented through the LEFAP project.*

*Government officials prepare for an assessment task for Level 3 of the English for Lao Government Officials curriculum.*



*Government officials arrive in the evening at Luang Prabang Teacher Training College for the private (fee-paying) 'Special Course' in English, which uses materials from the LEFAP-developed curriculum.*



With an official salary of only US\$20 a month, teachers college lecturers and family members supplement income by preparing and selling food to students attending evening classes.



Khan Khai Teacher Training College, six kilometres outside the capital town of Phonsavanh, conducts the English for Government Officials program in Xiengkhouang Province.



*Khan Khai Teacher Training College.*

*View from Khan Khai College*



*The shop at the entrance to the college where we enjoyed a chilly round of beer (cf. Chapter 6 'Snapshot'). Staff housing can be seen to the right of the shop.*



The English Language Resource Centre (*Sune Pasa Angit*) is the hub of the network of provincial resource centres housed at the five teacher training colleges involved in the LEFAP project. Established in 1993 with AusAID funding, the ELRC began as a lending library for English language teachers in Vientiane. Subsequently, AusAID completed the renovation of the old French villa, and added a Self Access Centre and three training rooms.



The ELRC is a pleasant place to work with its wide, shady verandas ...



... and tropical garden.



The library in the ELRC in Vientiane is available to English language teachers who pay a membership fee of 10,000 kip (US\$1) a year.

*The library within the ELRC in Vientiane.*

The Self Access Centre (SAC) is open to all government officials. At the beginning of the LEFAP project, it had some magazines, some 'Business English' books and General English worksheets. No new resources had been made since the previous AusAID project because of the limited language skills of the general staff.



*The SAC within the ELRC in Vientiane.*



Inappropriate and limited as the ELRC's resources were for the specific language needs of government officials, the ELRC was resourced well in comparison to the provincial resource centres and the English sections of provincial teachers college libraries.

*The English section of a provincial teachers college library.*





The Lao national emblem formerly had a hammer and sickle at the top that ‘stood for communism, the working class, farmers and the Soviet Union’ (Faming, 1998:10). In the mid-1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Lao government redesigned the national emblem, replacing the hammer and sickle with the most revered Buddhist monument in the region, the *Tha Luang* stupa. This was both an outward sign of adapting to the changed global power structures and an affirmation by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party of the centrality of Buddhism to Lao life. Both emblems include a hydroelectric dam and a highway as symbols of prosperity (Faming, 1998:15) through modern technology. The technology is balanced by paddy fields and forest, signifying the importance of agriculture and the country’s rich natural resources to both the economy and Lao life. According to Faming (1998:10), the sheaves of glutinous rice that encircle both emblems ‘directly refer to the main agricultural product and staple food’. As Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn (1994:17) point out, they are also a symbol of ‘Laoness’, as the eating of glutinous rice is ‘proudly accepted as part of a cultural identity’ that distinguishes the Lao from the ‘white rice culture’ of the Thai. These symbols combine to suggest that ‘the Lao government wants to control modernization without destroying either the environment or the national culture’ (Faming, 1998:16).

Buddhism, the state religion of the Lao PDR, is central to the life of the ethnic Lao.



*Monks walking in Vientiane.*



*Boys passing through the grounds of a wat (temple) while a monk looks on.*



*A Sitting Buddha statue in Ho Prakhao, Vientiane.*



*A Hindu deity from the Khmer Angor period has been reinterpreted as Buddhist at Wat Phu in the southernmost province of Champasak,*



*Monks' quarters in a temple in Luang Prabang Province.*



'The unique religious system of Laos stems largely from the synthesis of Buddhism and animism ... This harmonious symbiosis also provides the foundation of what is unique in Lao culture' (Vistarini, 1986:iv).



*Lao women prepare the centre piece for a baci.*

'The Lao, as with other Tai-speaking peoples, believe in souls (khuan) which need to be integrated with the body to ensure the well-being of the individual. A ritual called the *baci* or *sou khuan* is widely performed to achieve this' (Ngaosyvathn, 1990:283).

'The rite is conducted by a ritual expert or elder (often a former Buddhist monk) who, usually, is well versed in Pali or one who knows the appropriate ritual texts ... The officiant, who usually wears white garb or at least a white scarf, is generally known as *mo khuan* ... *mo* meaning "doctor" or "healer" ... His prayers are likely to include formulae from Bhuddist texts' (Ngaosyvathn, 1990:294).



*A baci ceremony before a Lao woman leaves to study in Australia.*



*Tying the yarn.*

The ceremony 'reaffirms the solidarity of those who take part in it' (Ngaosyvathn, 1990:289). It concludes with guests tying yarns around each others' wrists. While the receiver holds one hand up in the prayer position, the yarn is first swept over the other wrist to sweep away bad luck and invite good luck. Others support the recipient with a gentle touch on the arms or back.



On the national emblem, the words *Peace*, *Independence*, *Democracy*, *Unity* and *Prosperity* are written in Lao on the banner wrapped around the base of the rice sheaves. Interpreting this slogan, Manynooch Faming writes that for the Lao PDR, *Peace* 'is based on living together peacefully and respectfully, recognizing the sovereignty of other countries and never intervening in the affairs of other countries'. *Independence* means that the Lao PRD is 'a sovereign country not only because of its freedom from colonization, but also because of its freedom to make unilateral decisions in its own style in order to facilitate better living conditions for the Lao people, by the Lao people'. *Democracy* and *Unity* refer to the Lao PDR's 'own distinct form of participatory democracy, which emphasises equity, equality, and sustainable development'. *Prosperity* refers to both economic and cultural wealth (Faming, 1998:11-20).

## Chapter 4: The project

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### *A snapshot of the researcher as project worker and culture learner*

*It's 1999 and I'm back in Vientiane after four years away. The team leader picks me up at the airport and deposits me in a hotel room. Having spent the last few months in hotel rooms while working on a project in Vietnam, I'm keen to move out as soon as possible. The opportunity comes sooner than expected. Within the hour, two Lao friends arrive, and Bounsy, a former colleague, now widowed with four teenage children, urges me to move in with her. My friend registers me with the chao ban (village headman) and I adjust myself to family life. I learn much from watching Bounsy's interactions with family, neighbours and friends as well as the complete strangers who turn up at her gate seeking her renowned help with Australian and American visa applications. My rusty language skills polish up rapidly in the four months I stay with Bounsy as she refuses to speak anything but Lao to me. From time to time she scolds me when, exhausted after a day at work, I answer her in English. Most evenings we watch Thai news on her ancient black and white television, followed by the Thai soapie she is addicted to. We have long discussions in which I try to explain world news to her and she tries to explain why people had behaved in certain ways in the soapie, and whether or not she thinks people would behave that way in Laos.*

*Every morning I putter downtown on my Honda Dream motorbike, joining the throng that packs the road at this time of day. I keep a wary eye on my fellow road-users until I reach the English Language Resource Centre (Sune Pasa Angit) – more commonly known in English as the ELRC – where I am based. I'm pleased to be working there with old colleagues from a decade ago when we were all teachers at the National Polytechnic. And it's good to be back in the old French villa that houses the ELRC. Last time I was here AusAID was renovating it and every day posed a new challenge just to find a way to get into work.*

*Now it's been restored to its former graciousness with wide verandas where morning tea is served during training courses and where parties are held at the end of training, for Pi Mai (Lao New Year) or for International New Year. In the gardens, coconut palms, banana plants, orchids and bougainvillea flourish under the care of the Day Guard and the Night Guard. The Day Guard mostly sits outside reading the newspaper and (for a small fee) guarding your motorbike while you're inside. The Night Guard sleeps. It's all kept clean by Pa (Aunty) and her daughter.*

## **Project orientation**

I was one of four foreign (i.e. non-Lao) advisors plus a team leader working on the three-year Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) project. The stated goal of the project was to ‘enhance the capacity of the Government of Laos (GoL) to meet its ASEAN-related English language communication needs’ (AusAID, 1999b). It was, however, broader than that, comprising not only a component aimed specifically at ASEAN-related English but also a component targeting the broader range of officials who needed ‘English language skills to interact effectively with donors and investors’ (AusAID, 2001a). As the responsibility for the language learning of these two groups of officials was divided between two ministries (cf. Chapter 2, page 31), the four project advisors were based in two separate locations belonging to the respective ministries. The goal of the two advisors at the International Relations Training Centre (IRTC) within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was to develop and implement a high-level English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course for officials directly involved in ASEAN work. My fellow advisor and I worked on the second component and were based at the English Language Resource Centre (ELRC) which AusAID had established six years earlier in a former French villa owned by the Ministry of Education. Our task was to develop an English language curriculum pathway for the broader range of officials, which would also provide a ‘feeder-function’ for the high-level English for ASEAN course. These ‘feeder courses’ became known as the English for Government Officials program.

We were to work with a team of Lao counterparts who, the project design envisaged, would be attached to the project for the full three years. The curriculum and accompanying materials developed by this team were to be implemented in both Vientiane-based ministry training units and in the country’s five teacher training colleges in Champasak, Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, Xiengkhouang and Vientiane provinces (see map on page xi). In addition, we would be training teachers in this network to deliver the courses we developed, so I was looking forward to an interesting and varied few years. As the project unfolded, however, we became aware that its design was based on faulty assumptions about the English language teaching and learning context for Lao government officials. This chapter documents my observations of the needs and the decisions we – the implementing team – made to reconcile the social reality with the project design. This was a process which raised

significant practical, pedagogical and ethical questions, and led me to question the sustainability of the team's efforts.

## The design

The story begins with our team ensconced in the ELRC trawling through the project design document, trying to reconcile what we knew of the situation with what we were reading. Our task was stated in the design document as being 'to enhance the capacity of the Central ELRC in Vientiane to provide a quality-improvement outreach to the regional network of Teacher Training Colleges and to line-ministry ELT units so that these may better support the ASEAN mandate' (AusAID, 1999b:38). Following the standard AusAID project design procedures, this goal was to be achieved through designated outputs, as summarised in Table 1, below.

**Table 1: Designated project outputs**

Focus		Output Description	Reports
Central ministry English language teaching (ELT) units	1	A map of the line-ministry ELT units resulting from an audit of the current curriculums and management systems, and a current skills profile of the teachers in the units.	1
	2	A group of 40 line-ministry EL teachers, including a target of at least 50% females, with the Graduate Certificate in ELT.	3
Provincial centres	3	The conduct of 'a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 44' workshops for provincial teachers.	1
Quality Assurance	4	A Quality Assurance Group established.	1
Counterpart training	5	A group of at least two Lao master trainers <sup>16</sup> appropriately skilled to conduct ELT audits.	2
	6	A group of five Central ELRC Lao master trainers, including a target of at least two females, appropriately skilled to train teaching and management personnel in network institutions – to be achieved through a staff-development program 'to enhance and extend the skills of Lao master trainers'.	1
Curriculum and materials	7	Policies systems and plans for standardisation and articulation.	3
	8	Two standardised and benchmarked General English courses.	5
Equipment	9	Equipment and materials procured and installed in the Central ELRC - 'mainly computer hardware and software and computer consumables', the purpose of which was to 'support the Project'.	2

(Source: AusAID, 1999b:93-96)

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout this project, the counterpart group, i.e. those Lao personnel who were to work alongside the advisors to achieve the project objective, were referred to in the design, by the advisors and by the group themselves, as 'master trainers' (although this only partially describes their role). In order to avoid confusion, I will use the more conventional term 'counterparts'.



For accountability and transparency purposes, on-going project funding was based on the timely achievement of predetermined stages ('milestones') of progress towards output completion as documented in 'milestone' reports written by the advisors. The number of reports to be written for each output, an activity consuming large amounts of the time, is also included in Table 1, in which can also be seen examples of the current 'best practice' of the West – gender equity and quality assurance.

Output 1, an audit of the central ministry English language teaching (ELT) units, was our first major task. The project design document informed us that there 'appears to be some 40 such [units] with possibly an average of two English language teachers in each' (AusAID, 1999b:19). The Graduate Certificate in ELT, specified in Output 2 as the preferred training for 40 of these ministry English language teachers, was a course that had supposedly been established at the National University of Laos (NUOL) under AusAID's previous ELT project (AusAID, 1999b:18). In reality, it had not been conducted since that project finished. Research conducted by a senior official from the Lao Ministry of Education found the implementation to have been constrained by a faulty project design which failed to recognise the inadequacy of, and hence provide for, resources at NUOL. Further constraints revolved around unresolved concerns about the maintenance of standards and international recognition of standards (Lachanthaboun, 1998). Moreover, both this and other research seeking the views of Lao stakeholders (Ellis & Kelly, 1998) found implementation of the Graduate Certificate in ELT to be constrained by a lack of responsiveness to the social context and classroom realities in Laos. In addition, by the time of the implementation of LEFAP most of the Lao trainers who had previously conducted that training were no longer available, their skills now being called upon in other areas or being upgraded through overseas study.

The LEFAP project designers, presumably unaware of the multiplicity of reasons for the non-implementation of the course, nevertheless specified that '[i]n the event that entry to the Certificate is not possible, alternative training ... will have to be found' (AusAID, 1999b:43), with the added specification that such training was to be of a comparable standard to the Graduate Certificate in ELT (AusAID, 1999b:44), i.e. comparable to an Australian Post-Graduate Certificate. 'Finding' an alternative teacher training course would involve paying another provider to conduct one. However, this was not part of the costing on which AusAID had awarded the contract and, understandably, the Australian managing agency had no intention of our



‘finding’ a course for which it would have to ‘find’ extra money. The only alternative was for us to develop a course endorsed by the Lao Ministry of Education. On the one hand this was a more educationally satisfactory option as the course we developed could be tailored to the specific needs of the Lao teachers and to the specific issues in implementing the course we developed. On the other hand, it would add considerably to the work load to be completed within the timeframe.

Output 3 – the provision of the (apparently arbitrary number of ‘a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 44’) workshops for provincial teachers – indicated that the project designers considered these teachers required different training in order to implement the same course as the Vientiane-based teachers. The design document noted that in the five focal provinces there were approximately 30 English language teachers with a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma in ELT obtained under the previous project (AusAID, 1999b:44) – unlike the ministry teachers, the majority of whom were assumed to have no ELT qualifications. The difference in specified training reflected this but it also assumed that these provincial teachers were available to teach the government officials. In fact, because of the shortage of skilled teachers, most were required to continue working in their primary capacity of English language teachers and teacher trainers within the provincial teacher training colleges.

These first three outputs demonstrate that AusAID’s priority was to focus on the capital city rather than the provinces. To further emphasise this priority, while we were required to audit the ministries, we were not required to either investigate (though we did) or report on (so we did not) the situation in the provinces. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, four reports were required to be submitted about the progress of the training of ministry teachers, but only one was required for the training of provincial teachers. Nor were we required to report on the outcomes of the provincial workshops, only to submit a plan for them.

There was also training for counterparts to be devised (Outputs 5 & 6). Apart from participating in the ministry audits, the training was aimed at equipping the counterparts to undertake the tasks outlined in the Project Design Document (AusAID 1999:42):

**Task 1:** Induct network members into new general English courses.

**Task 2:** Train staff of Teacher Training Colleges, ELT teachers in the ministries and other members of the network to comply with standards for data management and quality control.

**Task 3:** Design and monitor staff/resource development as needed.

**Task 4:** Brief network members on newly-established policies and standards.

As it turned out, our difficulties lay not in the provision of training for counterparts but in actually *having* counterparts. The LEFAP project design had envisaged that we work with five full-time counterparts; however, the project began with only three part-time counterparts and for one-third of the project we remained seriously short-staffed<sup>17</sup>, adding to our concerns about the time frame. The prime reason for this was that, despite the teacher upgrading that had occurred under the previous AusAID project, the pool of skilled language teachers was still limited. Consequently, as one of the initial counterparts explained, *‘The criteria [required for working on this project] is quite high. In the institutions where the [possible] counterparts are working, they require this kind of people as well. They don’t want to let them go because they need them and their work is important’* (Counterpart 1).

Our difficulties in attracting counterparts was exacerbated by the contentious issue of salary ‘supplements’, which donor agencies generally regard as working against sustainability – a view I call the ‘hard-line stance’. In Laos, to call it a ‘supplement’ is a misnomer as the amount is inevitably greater than the government salary of approximately US\$20 a month – which some Vientiane-based colleagues refer to as their ‘petrol money’. The ‘pragmatic stance’ acknowledges that Lao government employees have to augment their government salary and so, if there is no supplement from the project, counterparts are likely to absent themselves in order to earn income elsewhere or they will conserve their energies during project hours for their after-hours, income-earning jobs. In this instance, in some kind of compromise between these two stances, the project was offering a small supplement that was *lower* than on AusAID’s previous ELT project even though people had, presumably, gained skills for working on that project. Understandably, this was not attractive to the experienced people we required. As our counterpart again explained, *‘The qualified people – they can get extra jobs apart from their permanent job in government institutions. The extra job, its pay is better than on this project’* (Counterpart 1).

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<sup>17</sup> The project design recommended that counterparts include the current ELRC Director and the Self Access Centre (SAC)/ESP coordinator. The latter was in Australia on an AusAID scholarship. She did, however, return in the last six months of the project and became a ‘counterpart’ although by that time there were no advisors to work alongside.

Eventually, the supplement was raised but, despite our best efforts, it was not until almost a year later that we finally achieved a stable, reasonably skilled and committed group of counterparts. All of this final team had previously been involved – some extensively – in delivering in-service training. Some were experienced in briefing others, as well as monitoring staff and resource development. Designing materials was more problematic because of the counterparts’ own limited written English skills – even amongst those who had returned from post-graduate studies in Australia and the USA, such is the skills level amongst Lao English language teachers.

The ultimate efforts of the team were directed at the development and implementation of ‘two standardised and benchmarked General English courses’ (Outputs 7 & 8). Elsewhere in the document it was stipulated that, in total, ‘the two courses must represent a minimum of 500 contact hours between teacher and student’ (AusAID, 1999b:74). Reference was made to the possibility that ‘the more advanced course could well contain elements of a “broad band” ESP preparation for the English for ASEAN courses at the IRTC’ (AusAID, 1999b:41), i.e. it would have a greater focus on developing the discourse required for that course. The design document (AusAID, 1999b:74) stipulated that the ELRC-developed courses would:

1. ensure articulation to the high level ESP course at the IRTC
2. include a syllabus with identified entry and exit benchmarks
3. include a list of target competencies
4. include accompanying course materials
5. include a ‘commercially available test selected by the Curriculum Planner to assess the trainee’s achievement of target competencies’.

The design document made clear the expectation that the accompanying course materials would rely heavily on commercial texts with the ‘main effort ... directed at selecting, procuring, and *perhaps* adapting available materials’ (AusAID, 1999b:45, my emphasis). Such a directive made me uneasy, partly because these commercial texts embody what Appelby (2002:28) has described as ‘the assumptions that “the West is best”, representing a state of modernity as “normality” to which the rest of the world might aspire’, but also because the use of such texts contradicts my own experience that the unfamiliar cultural references and contexts in Western-

developed texts confuse some learners and detract from, rather than facilitate, their learning.

My experience mirrors views reiterated over the years in the literature (e.g. Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984; Brown, 1990; Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Tickoo, 1988). More than two decades ago Alptekin and Alptekin (1984:18) urged that ‘if EFL [English as a Foreign Language] instruction in non-English speaking countries is to become effective and realistic, ... learners should be provided with opportunities to use English both in relation to local situations and to international circumstances in which they are interested’. A decade later, Holliday argued that a successful methodology for the teaching and learning of English in non-English speaking countries depended on a cultural sensitivity to the ‘wider social orientation of the students [which results in] a provision that the tasks carried out in the classroom are authentic and meaningful to the *real world* of the recipients’ (Holliday, 1994:173, italics in the original). It is difficult to envisage a commercial text book that could provide this for a Lao government official learning English as a linguistic tool to assist in the development of one of the world’s poorest countries. The LEFAP design expectation ignored the growing body of literature on English as an international language where the emphasis is on English as a functional, pragmatic tool used for specific, utilitarian purposes in limited contexts and, increasingly, with other non-native speakers of English (cf. Conrad, 1996; Gonzales, 1995; Kachru, 1992a, 1995; Krasnick, 1995). Furthermore, the statements in the LEFAP design document about materials development contradicted the observation in the same document that previous courses for Lao government officials had been ‘insufficiently customised’ (AusAID, 1999b:5).

My faith in the strength of the project design was not increased by the stipulation that a commercially available test be selected. Firstly, competency-based language assessment focuses on the ‘intended outcomes of language training, that is, the sorts of tasks a person may be expected to deal with in the target situation’ (Davies et al., 1999:27). As a course related to tasks with which Lao government officials would be dealing did not yet exist, and the target situations in which they would be operating were as yet unidentified, a commercially available test could not possibly assess their competency within them. Secondly, the Lao would be unable to continually purchase tests once AusAID funding ceased and, so, whatever commercially available test we bought would have to be used time and again. This, in

all probability, would quickly render it invalid as an assessment of anything other than the ability to memorise test questions and answers.

The final output in the project design document, as shown in Table 1, related to equipment to support the project. Reference was made, almost in passing, to the provincial Resource Centres needing further resourcing in terms of both learning and teaching materials (AusAID, 1999b:18). However, there was no output, and therefore no funding, to support this. The ELRC in Vientiane, on the other hand, was considered well resourced except that ‘the level of technology in this centre is still relatively low, with learning largely dependent on print material only’ (AusAID, 1999b:18) and, consequently, it was considered to be needing ‘networked computers’ (AusAID, 1999b:18).

In reality, while the teacher library at the ELRC was well stocked with methodology references and General English text books, both it and the Self Access Centre contained little of relevance to the work of a government official. Apart from General English video and audio cassettes, the Self Access Centre had a collection of magazines ranging from *Women’s Weekly* to *The Bulletin*, books mainly aimed at Business English and a small collection of General English worksheets for self study. The latter were photocopied pages from commercial texts, i.e. there had been no attempt to customise them in terms of the Lao culture or the specific English needs of a Lao government official. None was new, it being beyond the language competency of the ELRC staff to select or develop new material for self study purposes. Consequently, even a moderately dedicated user would quickly exhaust the supply.

Thus, without even leaving the ELRC, we soon became aware of disjunctions between the project design and reality. The LEFAP project designers had deemed the available resources to be adequate and, consequently, made no provision (in terms of time or funding) for their upgrading. They had wrongly assumed that the Graduate Certificate in ELT, which AusAID had funded during their last project, was, as they put it, ‘fully indigenised in its delivery’ (AusAID, 1999b:43). Flouting educational ‘best practice’ regarding relevance, they had recommended using commercial ‘general English’ texts – none of which had been developed for the Lao context or for such a specific group of learners. They had recommended a commercial test for a competency-based curriculum. Moreover, the basis on which AusAID had awarded the LEFAP contract left us with no option but to add the development and delivery of a replacement course to our workload. That workload was considerable because of the

assumption that potential counterparts would be free to leave their workplaces for a project offering little money for their skills.

## The reality

Further disjunctions between design and reality became apparent once we left the ELRC and began our audit of the ministry English language units, our provincial fact-finding visits and our student survey. We soon realised the needs of government officials and their teachers could not be addressed through the type of materials and training stipulated in the design. We also realised that adequately addressing these needs would inevitably increase the workload.

## Ministries

The issue of an escalating workload was partially offset by the erroneous assumption in the design about the number of English language teaching (ELT) units.

**Table 2: Assumptions and reality of ministry ELT provision**

Type of provision	Assumed	Reality	Comments
Ministry ELT units with own Lao teachers	40	9	2 were satisfied with their own ESP courses
Ministry ELT units with foreign volunteer teachers only	Not mentioned or not considered	4	
Ministry ELT units with contracted Lao teachers from elsewhere on an ad hoc basis	Not mentioned or not considered	9	
Ministries sending officials to external private classes	Not considered	6	
Ministries with no provision		4	
Number of Lao English language teachers	80	44	2 with (Australian) graduate diplomas in ELT 5 trained in Australia at the Defence International Training Centre (Victoria) 30 with NUOL teaching qualifications 7 with no teaching qualifications

*Source: Field notes*

As Table 2 shows, far from the assumed 40-odd ELT units, initial telephone enquiries revealed there was fewer than half this number, with fewer than half of these again functioning regularly and employing their own full-time teachers. The remaining units were staffed either by foreign volunteers (four units) or provided ad hoc tuition on a part-time basis paying for teachers from elsewhere (nine units). Six other ministries were sending officials to evening courses run by private providers or by NUOL,

which conducted an evening course (known as the ‘Special Course’) for fee-paying adults. Four others made no provision for their officials to learn English while a further three did not respond to repeated enquiries. When personnel from ministry training units were invited by the Ministry of Education to an information session about how the project could assist them, the session was attended by those from eight of the nine ministries with functioning units and two other ministries. It would seem there was far less interest than anticipated by the project designers.

As there was such a small number of ministries with their own units, the number of teachers was also smaller than assumed in the project design document. Instead of the expected 80 teachers, there were forty four. Only 18% of these were women, rendering impossible the training target of 50% female. The three teachers who each held an Australian Graduate Diploma in ELT (from the previous project) were now in administrative positions. To our consternation, when we conducted language assessments to select people for whatever equivalent of the Graduate Certificate we would conduct, we found only ten teachers<sup>18</sup> with the bare minimum to undertake such study. Only one of these was a woman. Apart from these ten, the language level of ministry teachers was very low. Most would have difficulty giving a correct model of English for their students beyond beginner level even though the majority had graduated from NUOL with a teaching qualification. It was clearly out of the question that 40 of these teachers would be able to take an Australian standard post-graduate level course.

The following journal entry, based on field notes, includes a description of a teacher struggling with the language level she was required to teach – a situation we commonly encountered in the ministry classrooms during the audit of ministry ELT units. In other respects, the ministry ELT unit described in the journal entry is atypical, being one of only two ministries conducting extensive training programs, and being well-resourced in comparison to most other ministry ELT units, with a small library, a video player, four audio cassette players and a photocopier.

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<sup>18</sup> None had Australian university qualifications. Instead, all ten had improved their English by working alongside long-term advisors (funded by the Swedish, English and Indian governments) placed within their units. Half were from the Ministry of National Defence (a large ministry) and, in addition to working alongside advisors, they had spent time in Australia upgrading their language and methodology skills at the Defence International Training Centre in Victoria.

### *JOURNAL ENTRY: A ministry ELT unit*

*The ELT unit for the Ministry of National Security (formerly the Ministry of Interior) is part of a training college on the outskirts of Vientiane city at Sanama (Horse Fields) so named because this was where the French military once stabled their horses. The unit is staffed by a Director, Deputy Director, a part-time foreign volunteer with no teaching qualifications, and seven teachers who have graduated in the last three years from the National University of Laos. The Deputy Director holds an Australian Graduate Diploma in ELT. He admits that the quality of graduates his ministry is able to attract is not high.*

*Officials from this ministry come here from all over the country to study a range of languages. They study full-time for two years (or two and a half years if they need to learn the Latin script) and live within the college grounds. New students are given a pre-course assessment for placement in Beginners (or pre-course as it is known) to learn the script, a Post-Beginners or a Pre-Intermediate level class. Classes have a maximum of 20 students. The core texts are the 'English for Lao Secondary Schools' books developed under AusAID's previous English language project. The Deputy Director is aware that these are not really suitable for the English language needs of the officials, but comments that they are preferred to commercial books because of their Lao content and there are no other Lao-based English course books around.*

*I am taken to watch a class of second-year students who are reading a passage from the set text. Each student has his own photocopied text book. The teacher asks a student to read the passage. He stands up and reads aloud. I have difficulty understanding some of what he reads although I understand the text is about an animal in the snow. The teacher does not correct his pronunciation. One by one, students around the room stand up and read. Without a book, certain parts of the text remain beyond my comprehension. I amuse myself for a while listening for particularly confusing parts and hoping someone will eventually say them in such a way that the mystery will be solved. A bell rings for the end of the lesson. The mystery was never solved.*

*I am aware that reading prepared texts aloud is a common pedagogical practice in the region, but when I talk to the teacher later, it is clear she is struggling with the level of texts she is teaching. It is probable that, rather than a pedagogical decision, it is because of this that pronunciation was not corrected. (November 1999)*



Only two ministries had courses designed to address the specific language needs of their field of work, having received extensive support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The SIDA-assisted units were also the only ones to express satisfaction with their programs. Three units were supplementing their commercial text book with specific purpose materials at intermediate level but cited the non-Lao content of this material as presenting difficulties. Problems with learning language contextualised in foreign countries was a common complaint across all ministries and all class levels.

## **Provinces**

In between visiting ministries, and after obtaining the Minister of Education's permission, we travelled to provinces to investigate the provision for government officials in the five designated teacher training colleges. A strong network already existed between the Ministry of Education (and hence our counterparts) and these teacher training colleges. Nevertheless, the counterparts were vague on detail about English provision though they knew that only two of the five provinces were already conducting courses, while one had attempted to conduct a course for nine months but had abandoned it. Administrators in that province later told us this was because of an inadequate budget for both teacher salaries and trainee per diems, and an inappropriate course book (an American-produced commercial text).

Our investigations soon revealed that, in general, the teaching skills of provincial teachers contrasted starkly with the teaching skills of most ministry teachers. This was not solely due to some provincial teachers having benefited under the previous AusAID project, as skills had also been developed in the colleges amongst *all* English language teachers by the support and assistance of well-qualified volunteers from the British organisation, Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO). These volunteers were placed in each of these regional colleges for two year periods in order to assist the Lao teachers to upgrade their methodology. Thus, the provincial provision for government officials was able to draw from a pool of teachers who had had opportunities to upgrade their teaching qualifications and their skills through day-to-day mentoring, and specific training. The following journal entry highlights the contrast (in general) between the skills of teachers of English classes for government officials in the provincial teacher training colleges and (in general) the skills of teachers in the central ministries as depicted in the previous journal entry (page 76).

### *JOURNAL ENTRY: A provincial ELT program for government officials*

*The teacher training college, in cooperation with the Provincial Human Resource Department (HRD), is currently running two beginners English classes of 20 students each, called Class A and Class B. The students are Directors and Vice Directors of Departments who have been released from their workplaces for a period of nine months to study five hours a day. The coordinator of the program and three other teachers have the Australian qualification, 'Graduate Certificate in ELT', which they gained through the previous AusAID-funded project. But they cannot spend all their time on this course as their skills are also needed for training the country's future English teachers. So, a total of nine teachers, drawn from the high schools as well as the college, teach 3-4 hours per week each on the program as additional work paid for out of the HRD budget.*

*The materials used were produced in a one-month workshop funded by AusAID. The workshop produced a syllabus of four modules plus materials and lesson plans to accompany Module 1. These materials are photocopies of commercial materials and a few worksheets that had been made for use in other contexts in Laos such as – I was amused to see – some worksheets I had made in 1990 while working at the National Polytechnic in Vientiane. The Director, himself a graduate of this course, is critical of it. He commented that the curriculum and the materials are incomplete and that they involve too much photocopying. He suggested that resources should include authentic materials such as newspaper articles. The teachers are aware that the materials aren't directed at government officials, saying, for example, that there are worksheets for teaching jobs and daily routines but they were not the jobs and routines of a government official. But they couldn't adapt the materials, they said, because they didn't know, in English, the names of the jobs or the ministries.*

*Both the HRD official and the TTC Director want a much stronger focus on speaking because of officials' need to attend meetings and conferences etc. In the HRD official's opinion, because the current course lacks this focus, graduates can't function adequately in English when they return to their workplaces and/or have to travel abroad. The Director thought this was a methodology problem as most teachers, he said, use Lao in the classroom and, therefore, students' conversational skills are still limited when they finish. As an ex-student he is in a good position to know.*

*I observe a class. The teacher handles a communicative 'survey' activity with ease. Both he and the students are clearly very familiar with the activity. He also gives all his*

*classroom instructions in English, e.g. “Stand-up, please” and “Get into groups”. The students respond easily. This is no act for me. This is normal classroom behaviour. Very disturbing, however, is the behaviour of four people who started without the Latin script. They appear to have no confidence at all. They avoid eye contact and almost squirm with embarrassment about their lack of achievement in comparison with their peers. When the class was doing the survey, these four tried to shrink away. I approached one of them and began to ask him the survey questions. When he realised I could understand him, he gained a little confidence and answered my questions without ducking his head, but when another student showed curiosity he became tongue-tied again.*

*The two current class groups are studying at the same level and have been allocated the same amount of time to finish Module 1 even though at the time of starting Class A was known to be more advanced than Class B. Both classes will go on to Module 2 but will be given a different final (grammar) test because “Class B wouldn’t be able to do Class A’s test”. The point of such assessment was unclear to me then, but, rather than risk implying criticism, I didn’t comment or question the decision. (December 1999)*

Leaving aside the difference in teaching skills, there were similarities between many of the ministries and the practice in both provinces implementing courses for government officials: the absence of a pre-course assessment to determine language levels; the resultant mixed-level classes; and the paucity of resources to support the program. Unlike the overcrowded conditions in schools, in the provinces and the ministries class sizes were limited to 20 students. This suggests Lao recognition that smaller classes afforded more optimal learning conditions, and also reflects the importance placed on the language learning of government officials. However, in the provincial teacher training colleges, as in the ministries, we found there was little satisfaction with the outcomes of the course. In the journal entry, the teachers, HRD officials and the Director (from his experience as a student of the course) were all critical of the materials hastily developed in one month with previous AusAID funding. All were certain that a course for government officials needed to focus on speaking as a priority and to include authentic materials relevant to the lives of Lao government officials. The case against ‘selecting, procuring and perhaps adapting’ commercial texts (AusAID, 1999b:45) was mounting.

Another point of similarity between the ministries and the provinces was that the highest language proficiency was roughly equivalent amongst the teachers in both contexts. Thus, to the ten teachers we had identified as potentially having sufficient

language proficiency to access a course at graduate certificate level, we could now add fourteen provincial teachers. Having only 24 teachers throughout our network with this level of English had serious implications for the staffing of any course designed to articulate into the English for ASEAN course. The Component 1 team's analysis of their situation had led them to set the entry benchmark for that course at approximately the level of the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR) level 2<sup>19</sup>. This meant that our 'high level' group of teachers would be called upon to teach the (articulating) course for which the exit benchmark was only marginally below their own level of English!

The project design was looking more and more unrealistic but we had one more task to complete before the picture was complete. We needed to know more about the students themselves and what they perceived their English language communication needs to be.

### **Students**

To find out the students' perceptions, a counterpart and I analysed the 300 responses to the survey we sent to officials attending courses in both the ministries and the provinces. The design of this survey sought information about the students' 'broad band' ESP needs as well as their 'general English' needs, i.e. it sought insights into their work-related language needs as well as their social language needs. In designing this survey, I drew on my previous experience working with senior government officials in Vietnam<sup>20</sup> and on the proposed course content for the English for ASEAN course. This was on the understanding that if courses were to articulate into the English for ASEAN course, then government officials studying the lower level courses would need to develop certain specific language (e.g. vocabulary such as 'sustainability') in order to access such a course. The English version of this survey can be seen in Appendix 3.

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<sup>19</sup> The ISLPR is an Australian testing system developed by Wylie and Ingram (1999). Level 2 is approximately equivalent to the more widely used International English Language Testing System (IELTS) 4.

<sup>20</sup> On that particular AusAID project I was a classroom teacher. There being no curriculum, I began my classes based on a self-compiled and very broad needs survey. After this, I was able to contextualise those needs as their preoccupations became apparent in the classroom. From this teaching experience I learnt much about the work of a government official in a 'least developed nation' struggling to move from a centrally-controlled to a market economy.

The responses revealed that in the provinces students were drawn from a broad range of workplaces, e.g. the Department of Statistics and the Department of Roads and Bridges, and that most held senior positions (Director, Deputy Director) within these organisations. Students in the central ministries tended to be lower ranking. In both contexts, the majority were at beginner level of English language learning. This could not have been unknown to the project designers as it was in reports (MacLeod & Sithirajvongsa, 1997; UNDP, 1998, 1999) referred to in the project design document. Thus, while it was clearly necessary for the learning pathway to start at beginner level, we were required to develop courses which would articulate into the fully-fledged ESP course, English for ASEAN. This is a long distance for students to travel, and the 'minimum of 500 contact hours between teacher and student' (AusAID, 1999b:74) was a gross underestimation for the lengthy curriculum pathway that would be required.

The survey sought student perceptions of important curriculum content to use as a basis for curriculum and materials development. With such a broad range of workplaces there was a danger of there being little consensus. However, while we would not be able to address the specific workplace language needs, we identified the most commonly occurring perceived uses of English, along with the most commonly occurring topics for which the officials considered they needed to use English. Table 3 (on the next page) shows students' highest priority as being able to discuss their work-related responsibilities, followed closely by wanting English for socialising. From the list of priority needs, this latter is the only one which could be termed 'General English'. However, the social English these Lao officials wanted would not be found in a commercial text book. The officials needed English for socialising with a foreigner, such as a representative of a development agency, over lunch or dinner with Lao food, with Lao topics of conversation and Lao cultural references. Otherwise, the most important topic they needed to be able to talk, listen, read and write about was human resources development. This is one of the Lao government's eight priorities for development and many officials were involved, or were expecting to be involved, in development cooperation projects towards the achievement of this goal. They also wanted language associated with Laos in general and with individual provinces in the context of development cooperation, tourism and culture. Their next priority was governance, a topic (as discussed in the previous chapter) high on the priority list of international development assistance agencies.

**Table 3: Student perceptions of English needs**

English needed for:	Topics of common interest:
Discussing work-related responsibilities	Human resource development
Socialising	Individual provinces (priority of provincial officials)
Attending conferences	Laos in general
Travelling abroad	Development cooperation projects
Attending meetings	Culture
Writing reports	Tourism
Reading reports	Governance

*Source: Field notes*

The survey sent a strong message, in agreement with the opinions of teachers and administrators, about the content and context of materials, but in conflict with the assumption in the project design that the main task in the development of materials would be ‘selecting, procuring, and perhaps adapting materials’ (AusAID, 1999b:45).

## **The decisions**

Once we understood the reality of the situation, we were able to make informed decisions. Other decisions could have been made. We could, for example, have made life easier for ourselves by complying with the specifications in the project design that we ‘select and procure’ materials and a ‘commercially available’ test. But these would not have addressed the English language needs of the Lao officials as we now understood them. This final part of the project implementation story tells of the decisions we made about the curriculum, materials and training in the light of our investigations, and as we endeavoured to meet the designated milestones, upon which on-going funding was reliant.

## **Curriculum**

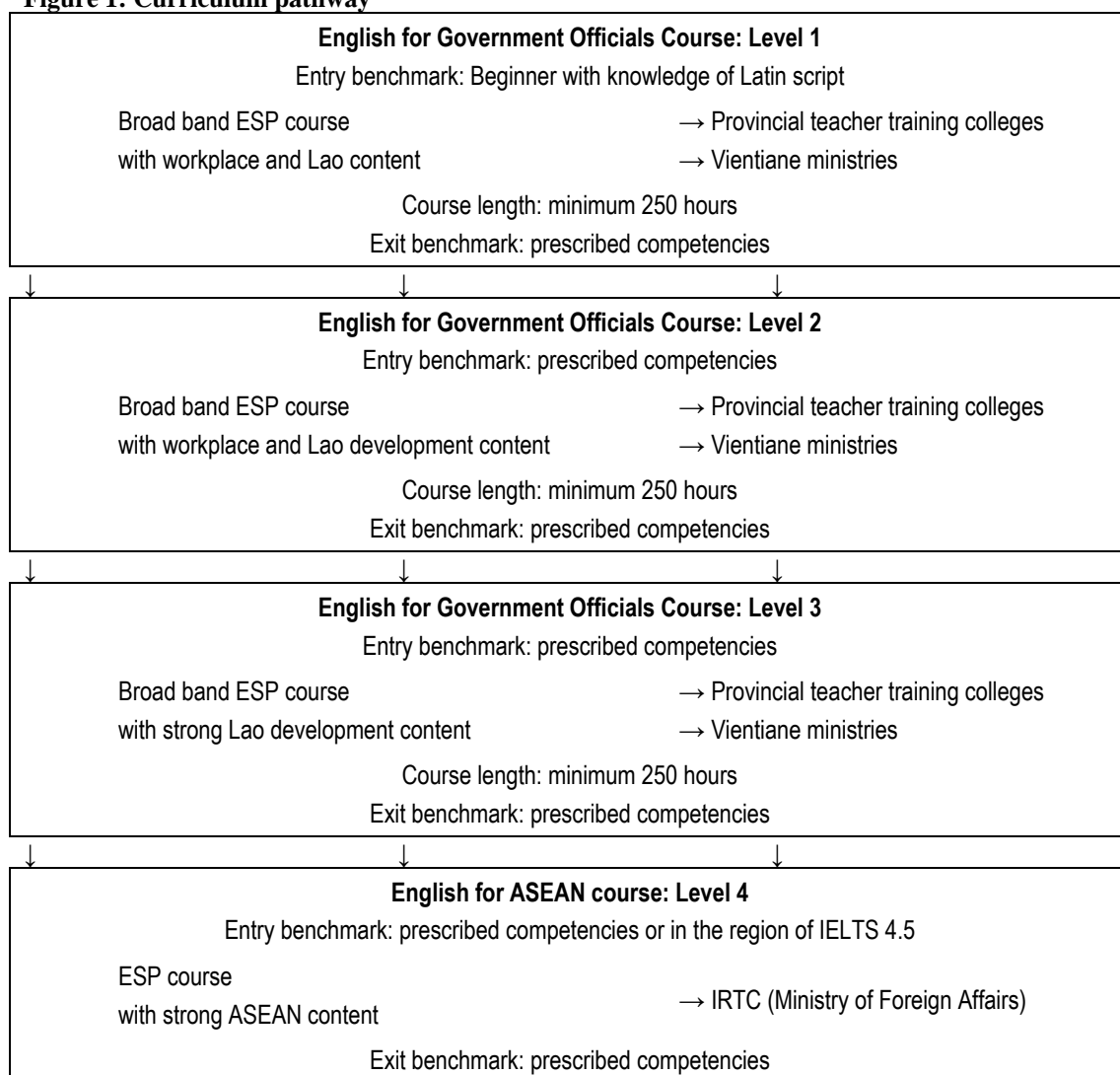
The milestones attracting regular injections of funding throughout the project were those attached to the development of benchmarked ‘General English’ courses for the government officials (see Table 1 on page 67). The LEFAP project design document also referred to Australia’s expertise in ‘the development of tracks of competency-based courses’ (AusAID, 1999b:25). My having previously developed nationally and state accredited competency-based language and teacher training curriculum for the Australian education context (Achren, 1995; Achren, 1995a; Achren et al., 2000) had resulted in my inclusion on the team. However, my previous experience of living and working in Laos caused me to have reservations about the practicality of implementing and sustaining a competency-based language curriculum

there. Such training has been developed to serve the workplace training agendas of Western nations well resourced in terms of skilled teachers, technology and printed matter. Even so, the considerable body of literature on the introduction of competency-based curriculum in Australia, as elsewhere, suggests that its introduction was not without controversy (e.g. Bamforth & Grieve, 1996; Brindley, 1994, 1998; Burrows, 1994; Sanguinetti, 1994), with prime concerns centred on issues of reliability and validity of the assessment outcomes, the cost of maintaining such systems, and the demands made on teachers' time. Was it, then, an appropriate curriculum for a country with limited resources and a paucity of skilled teachers and administrators? Would it be possible to establish a practical, reliable and valid assessment system? In its impoverishment would Laos be able to sustain the systems demanded by a competency-based training model?

Our counterparts, however, were interested in a competency-based curriculum although they had little, if any, knowledge of what it entailed. Their interest stemmed, not from any notions of appropriateness, but from their anticipation that a competency-based curriculum was to be introduced into the primary school system through an upcoming World Bank project. Thus, both the primary sector and a program for government officials would embody the current 'best practice' in governance – accountability and transparency – not necessarily in their content but through their assessment systems. While I had my reservations about the wisdom of introducing such a curriculum, for the counterparts it was an opportunity to enhance their understanding of what they saw as the way of the future, thus increasing, in Bourdieu's parlance, their symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977; 1979; 1990a; 1990b; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the early days, however, lack of counterpart knowledge meant that the decisions were led by the Australian advisors.

We decided that it would be necessary to develop a three-level curriculum pathway if the officials were to access the English for ASEAN course. As shown in Figure 1, below, the estimated minimum time to complete the first three levels of the pathway was 750 hours rather than the 500 recommended in the design. Thus, there was a 50% greater workload for curriculum and materials development. The curriculum pathway was adapted from the Australian nationally accredited curriculum 'Certificate in Spoken and Written English' (CSWE) (Manidis et al., 1992).

**Figure 1: Curriculum pathway**



*Source: Field notes*

The CSWE is organised around the systemic-functional linguistic view of language and language learning (cf. Halliday et al., 1987; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Martin, 1981), which emphasises the interdependence of text and context. Consequently, its competencies are based on an analysis of the generic structure of the socially-situated spoken and written texts considered necessary for adults in Australia to participate in employment, further education and the community – contexts differing significantly from those in which government officials would be using their language. However, the systemic-linguistic focus of the CSWE would enable us to use the elements of the generic structures they shared to guide the development of levels of competence, while the materials we developed would provide the relevant social contexts. In practical terms, given the Lao teachers' own language skills, time and effort would be needed to adapt the CSWE so that the curriculum document was



written in 'Plain English'. The competencies for each of the three levels of the course can be seen in Appendix 4a, while Appendix 4b details the 'Plain English' used to describe one of the Level 2 competencies, and Appendix 4c shows the information presented in both the Level 2 Teachers Book and the Students Book about the relationship of the competencies to the learning in a unit. This example also demonstrates the contextualisation of the materials.

As discussed previously (see page 72), a commercial test as suggested in the project design document was out of the question – no commercial test having been designed to assess the communicative competence of people in the target situation and cultural context of Lao development. Therefore, we decided to devote time and effort to developing the context-specific criterion-referenced tasks required for a competency-based system. In view of the already considerable demands on Lao teachers' time and their unfamiliarity with this form of assessment it would be impractical to expect them to develop tasks as is common in Australia. Moreover, this practice has led to the questioning of the reliability and validity of the assessment results (Brindley, 1998:70). Consequently, we adopted the strategy advocated by Brindley (1998:70) of developing 'banks of assessment tasks ... systematically linked to the achievement levels of whatever framework is being used'. Thus it was hoped to enhance validity and reliability by modelling the tasks we developed on the CSWE exemplar tasks (see Appendix 4d for an example). In an effort to enhance the security of these tasks, they were stored centrally at the English Language Resource Centre and their release administered by the Centre's Director.

I was uncertain about how well competency-based assessment would be received by the teachers, the administrators and the government officials/students themselves. Not only is it a radical departure from the usual grammar-based approach used in Laos, but, more particularly, it emphasises the language learning needs of the individual in contrast to the group approach exemplified in the journal entry on page 79. How acceptable, I wondered, would this individualistic approach be in a country where education emphasises a cooperative group focus (Emblem, 1996; Ng Shui Meng, 1991). It is a view shared by others in the region as shown by Kramsh and Sullivan (1996) in their descriptions of class groups in Vietnam. My uncertainty was not allayed by the comment of an administrator that government officials had a 'social club mentality' when it came to their English classes – that they wanted to be with

their ‘friends’. He predicted that they would not accept an assessment system in which they were not promoted to the next level along with their class group.

## **Materials**

We were on surer, but not firm, ground with the development of materials. The Lao stakeholders had been very clear about what they perceived as their needs in terms of topics and skills. Lao voices had confirmed my own observations, and suggestions in the literature (see pages 71-72) that the unfamiliar contexts caused teaching and learning difficulties and, moreover, that ‘foreign’ texts failed to provide relevant language such as the names of the jobs and workplaces of the students. Therefore, using authentic texts available locally (*Vientiane Times* – a twice-weekly English language newspaper with items translated from the Lao daily papers; UNDP reports), internationally (AusAID *Focus* magazine), and globally (development agency websites), we developed materials (students books, listening cassettes and a video) contextualised in Laos, Lao development and the working life of a Lao government official. This was not unproblematic. We were faced with the dilemma of what model(s) of English were both appropriate and possible. Ideally, the materials would be developed around a range of intercultural interactions utilising speakers from the region and from donor countries. This would have provided not only a range of accents, but also a more authentic representation of the officials’ working life; and an acknowledgement that when, for example, a Singaporean and a Lao meet, the communication norms they employ are not necessarily those of the dominant Western English-speaking nations (cf. Gonzales, 1995; Kachru, 1992a, 1995; Krasnick, 1995; Nelson, 1992). Ours was not an ideal world. Without access to a range of speakers, we presented authentic spoken communication through the interaction of Lao officials and Australian advisors. Mindful that the interaction was taking place in the Lao cultural context, we drew on our own experience and presented (we hoped) an interculturally competent Australian (cf. Lo Bianco et al., 1999) wanting to know more about Laos and hence enabling a range of social conversations to take place as well as work specific interactions.

Catering for teachers’ language proficiency was more problematic, not only at the third level (which was pushing the language limits of teachers within the network), but at all levels of the curriculum. We knew from our ministry audit and provincial visits that teachers had little idea of the language (such as the names of jobs

and ministries) that might be required in a ‘broad-band ESP course’ for government officials. Consequently, we wrote materials so that so they built the language skills, not only of the course participants (the government officials), but also of the teachers. Materials were also designed with an awareness of the limited preparation time available to teachers, who invariably worked two or three jobs to earn sufficient income.

Lao English language teachers were unfamiliar with a curriculum. For them, the curriculum is a course book. We wanted to raise awareness that the core texts related to the building of particular language competencies. In order to focus attention on these competencies, they were included in the front of the Students Book as well as in the Teachers Book, so that any student who looked through their course book would be aware of them even if the teacher did not draw their attention to them. They could then ask the teacher. In this way, it was hoped that the students’ demands to know (which they could make because of their social status) could help lead teachers to focus on the competencies.

The Ministry of Education held the copyright of the course materials which were printed at the Government Printing House and sold through the English Language Resource Centre. The project paid for initial print runs, which were sold at minimal profit and then the money used for the next print run. Administering this was the responsibility of the English Language Resource Centre. After some initial hiccups the system ran smoothly<sup>21</sup>. Establishing this system was a significant step for the Ministry of Education. When the previous AusAID project had attempted to initiate such a system for the reprinting of the English language course books for secondary schools, it had not been allowed.

## **Training**

So far our decisions and actions had not been queried by AusAID as they did not affect the achievement of the milestones as they were stated. It was a different matter with our decision to eschew the separate training for the two types of teachers – provincial and ministry-based – in favour of a combined three level training pathway linked to the course levels, as shown in the following table.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, although Lao is a signatory to the international copyright laws, copyright is not a well understood concept and, once printed, copies were for sale in the Government Printing House Bookshop when the intention was that the ELRC would be the sole outlet. The Ministry of Education successfully resolved this situation.

**Table 4: Training and curriculum pathway**

	Curriculum Pathway	Teacher Training Pathway	Training Duration	Training participants	Training conducted by:
<b>Planned</b>	Level 1 Course	Central Workshop	2 weeks	Combined	Advisors and counterparts
		In-venue follow-up workshops	3 days	All	Counterparts
		In-venue assessment workshops	6 days	All	Advisor (initially) and counterparts
	Level 2 course	Central Workshop	2 weeks	Ministry teachers	Advisors and counterparts
		Central Workshop	2 weeks	Provincial teachers	Advisors and counterparts
		In-venue follow-up workshops	3 days	All	Counterparts
		In-venue assessment workshops	3 days	All	Advisor (initially) and counterparts
	Level 3 course	Certificate in Teaching ESP (Government Officials)	6 weeks	Combined	Advisor and counterparts
		In-venue assessment workshops	3 days	All	Advisor (initially) and counterparts
<b>Added</b>	Level 2 course	Certificate in Teaching Government Officials	7 weeks	Ministry teachers	Counterparts

Source: Field notes

The deliberate linking of training to the courses and accompanying materials was in response to both the teachers' needs and to criticisms of the certificate training delivered under the previous project that training needed to relate more closely to assisting teachers with the materials they would be using (Lachanthaboun, 1998:49). Our reasoning for combining the training, clearly articulated in a number of reports to AusAID, was that:

- all teachers would be teaching the same courses
- all teachers would need training to teach these competency based courses and all teachers would need to come to terms with the unfamiliar content and unfamiliar language items
- only 25 teachers in the whole network had language skills potentially high enough to teach Level 3 of the curriculum

- there were not 40 line ministry teachers (cf. Table 1, Output 2) with a high enough English language competency-level to attend a certificate level course.

Despite our plans and despite the rationale being repeated in a number of reports, as can also be seen from Table 4, we eventually added a ‘certificate’ level course for ministry teachers. This was not of our own volition. Just when we thought we had completed the bulk of the training, AusAID suddenly realised there were not the specified number (and the number was the important factor, not the appropriateness of the training) of ministry teachers with a certificate. Our schedule was already gruelling. To prepare and deliver another course<sup>22</sup> put great pressure on the team.

This training pathway inevitably had a strong focus on training in competency-based assessment, with teachers attending ‘certificate’ training experiencing this new form of language assessment first hand through actually being assessed in the exit competencies of the course they would be teaching their students. These teachers then assessed their completed tasks according to the criteria and analysed their own language learning needs. This had the advantage of giving them hands-on experience of competency-based assessment as well as focusing their attention on where their own language needed up-grading. As an indication of those needs, at the beginning of the course only one teacher achieved all the competencies of the Level 3 course. Fortunately, this number rose significantly by the end of the course but still not everyone was competent in all the target language of the course they would soon be teaching. Those attending shorter courses could only do this on a much modified scale. In addition, workshops were held at each ELT unit at the time of each level of assessment. Thus, teachers who attended certificate training or Vientiane-based workshop training, and those teachers who were teaching the courses without any training, were mentored through pre-course assessment, Level 1 assessment, Level 2 assessment, and Level 3 assessment. In this way, teachers got specific, and highly relevant, assistance with their own students in an assessment system that differed markedly from their previous practice.

It also differed markedly to the previous practice of program administrators, who were accustomed to choosing and inviting the exact number of students for a

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<sup>22</sup> The teachers who had attended the Certificate in ESP (awarded by the Ministry of Education) were well aware that they were the only teachers with the language level to train for, and then teach, the Level 3 course, and were proud of this. The Ministry could not award this second group a certificate of the same name – so, to differentiate, the lower standard was given another name.

class from selection criteria which did not include their facility in English. Administrators attended only one centrally organised information session and the changing of this practice relied on the teachers reporting back to them after training and on counterparts meeting with each administrator on monitoring visits to each location. The first session in the initial round of pre-course assessments was hearteningly successful. A greater number of candidates than places available had been assembled. A counterpart, talking to these candidates before starting, told them that if they did not have 'English' script then the course was not suitable for them. Two people got up and left. "Well that was easy", I thought. "I wonder if they'll accept things as easily as that everywhere" (Journal entry, May 2000). As it turned out, the initial change was smooth in most places. However, one provincial and two ministry administrators selected their classes in the usual manner, i.e. without a pre-course language assessment. In another, administrators, intending to conduct two classes of 20 people per class, invited 40 people to attend the pre-course selection and were then worried about not having the requisite number per class when not everybody fitted the language criteria for the class level.

Teachers' understanding of the interrelation of the assessment and the course content gained new strength at the time of the first round of post-course assessments. Each venue, for reasons of expediency, selected one day for the assessments rather than conduct multiple and on-going assessments in accord with one of the underlying principles of a competency-based approach. Having started their courses on different dates, the dates for assessment were also different for each venue, enabling counterparts to attend each assessment day in both provincial and ministry venues. In each venue, counterparts led the teachers in conducting the assessments, and then held workshops about marking the completed assessment tasks according to the criteria. I was present at the first of these workshops and, as the next journal entry shows, it proved to be revelatory for the teachers: not only did it result in positive teacher development in terms of understanding student needs, but it also helped teachers understand how they could make changes to their own teaching in order to better address those needs. I would never have anticipated that the criteria for competency would have such a profound pedagogical impact. Watching the 'pennies dropping' during this two-day workshop, I thought that my scepticism about the appropriateness of the competency-based approach for Laos might have been severely misplaced.

### *JOURNAL ENTRY: An assessment marking workshop*

*We're in Luang Prabang where today we held a workshop to help teachers assess outcomes according to a set of criteria. This was most successful with writing where teachers could see exactly how students were being assessed. This was followed by a 'Needs workshop' in which we looked at how well each student could meet the criteria for competency. Teachers were very interested in this. I could have heard pennies dropping. At last they have a system that shows them what to look for, so that when asked what a student's needs are, they need no longer look bewildered and mutter "English".*

*Teachers looked at what non-competent students could and couldn't do. They made a list and looked at how these students could be helped further. All agreed, for example, that students asking questions, as opposed to answering them, was a general weakness. They could see that this was because they were always the ones asking the questions and so students were only getting practice in answering and not in asking. So, through analysing the students' needs teachers were also able to see what they needed to do to address their students' needs. The teachers expressed it as 'paying more attention to this in the next class'.*

*It was also clear to the teachers that there was a group of students who needed more tuition before being reassessed and moving on to the next model. They estimated how much more time would be needed (6 weeks) and decided that they should go back to a particular unit in the course and start from there. This seemed an exciting proposition to them until someone said "But the administration won't like this." It was left to the advisor (me) to talk to the administrator who was, in fact, amenable. (July 2000)*

The process and the responses were repeated, in essence, in each venue at the time of its first post-course assessment: teachers gained insights into their own classroom practice and planned for student needs based on assessment outcomes, but then feared they would not be allowed to act on this. However, when approached, administrators agreed readily. Radically different as the assessment system was from their previous practice, teachers and administrators had shown themselves willing to try the new system and, once tried, appeared to embrace it.

### **Project ending**

A year later, however, a crack appeared. By this time, I was virtually chained to my desk at the ELRC, developing training, devising assessment tasks and writing the interminable reports on which the next funding payments depended. But, on a rare

foray into the outside world, a conversation with a student in a Level 3 class I was observing suggested that all was not going according to plan. The teacher had been having difficulty getting students to participate orally. At some point he left the room and a student took the opportunity to air a concern. He told me that there were other students in the class who had not achieved the required competencies for the level. What I didn't know at the time was whether this was an isolated incident or a widespread phenomenon.

I informed the counterparts who were now responsible for program monitoring and I ploughed on with meeting the reporting deadline before my final two months on the LEFAP project when counterparts and I raced to complete the revision of materials. I had no time to follow up the assessment issue. From time to time, however, I recalled the classroom incident and wondered what was happening in the difficult but crucial area of assessment in other venues and, perhaps more importantly, why it was happening. Did it reflect a lack of cultural appropriateness? Had we made the right decisions? Had our determination to address the needs of students been at the expense of the training needs of teachers? Certainly, developing such a lengthy curriculum pathway with socially-situated accompanying materials was a considerable workload. Our assessment of the needs, and attempts to address them, had led to what Holliday (1994:139) describes as 'the subsequent need to serve two masters – the realities of the local situation and the hyperrational requirements of the funding agency'.

However, the 'hyperrationality' of the project design (with its inputs, outputs and statistical accountability measures) was founded on inconsistencies and assumptions. By referring to reports (MacLeod & Sithirajvongsa, 1997; UNDP, 1998, 1999) about a previous communications audit and language profile (AusAID, 1999b:106), the project designers indicated their awareness that the majority of officials were at beginner level. Moreover, the time frames assumed for the movement from beginners level to a fully-fledged ESP course were grossly underestimated. As a result, the time allowance for the subsequent curriculum and materials development was inconsistent with the designers' own advice that 'project planning and curriculum development take due account of actual current levels of proficiency in the target populations' (AusAID, 1999b:106).

There was also the inconsistency of identifying the provinces as being in need of further resourcing and then providing no time or funding to address that need. The



view that the ELRC in Vientiane was adequately resourced but in need of computers rested on three assumptions: that the resources currently languishing in the ELRC were appropriate; that officials in Vientiane needed computers to assist their learning but provincial officials did not; and that officials in Vientiane and the staff at the ELRC would find computers a valuable source of language learning. In fact, once the computers were installed there *was* an increase in users of the Self Access Centre (SAC) but they were not accessing English language programs. Indeed, with no provision for training either for users or SAC staff, it would have been difficult for them to do so. Instead, it was free e-mail access that brought them to the ELRC.

These inconsistencies and assumptions, combined with concerns prompted, as I have explained, by the crack in the system – students accessing classes without having achieved the requisite language competencies – caused me to question again the appropriateness of the project design in general and the curriculum model in particular. The implications of these for the sustainability of the English for Government Officials program was the impetus for my embarking on the current research, as elaborated in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5: A researcher's journey

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### *A snapshot of support*

*Mr X was in my first English class in Laos. It was one of the first English classes at the National Polytechnic Institute where I was helping set up the English Department. My 'beginners' class was an interesting mix of Polytechnic lecturers, administrative staff, Russian advisors – and Mr X. When his name turned up on my class list, the other foreigners commiserated. Being so important, they warned, he'll dominate the class; others will be afraid to speak; he'll always have to be right. They were wrong. From the beginning, Mr X encouraged the other students. He was the first to jump to his feet for any 'communicative' activity, urging the others to get up too. Mr X only attended class for a few weeks; he was a busy man. But he had given his approval and sent a signal to the staff about learning English. He turned up again in the next semester when we began a higher level class. He must have been studying elsewhere because he was again able to join in the activities. At the end of one of these, he nodded his head and murmured, "Yes, yes. This is what we need". And then he disappeared from the class again.*

*Years later, I was invited by a senior Ministry of Education administrator to accompany her to a function. In Lao fashion the details of the function were not explained to me. And I neglected to ask. I should have known better. I found myself seated, next to her, in the position of honour at the centre of the long banquet table. Opposite us, and so also in a position of honour, was a man whose face looked familiar, but I couldn't place it. He too was looking thoughtful. After a short while, he said to me in slow but perfect English, "I didn't recognise you at first because you are more beautiful than before". Western feminist responses flickered in my mind but I acknowledged his communicative intent with a smile, not knowing how to reply to this man I still didn't recognise. I heard his remark being translated up and down the table accompanied by murmurs of "Gaeng, nohk!" – "Isn't he clever!"*

*I knew then that this was a very important man. Suddenly I remembered. This was Mr X from the Polytechnic. This was Mr X who was now Vice Minister for Education. This was the man who could give me the permission I needed to conduct my research. My invitation to the function was now clear. My patron in the Ministry (my primary gatekeeper) was making sure the Vice Minister (a prime gatekeeper) remembered me. To my relief, he was now busying himself with his dinner, not inviting any more conversation. He had acknowledged me favourably. It was enough.*

## **Gaining support**

My immediate research concerns lay, as I have described in the previous chapter, with the appropriateness of the competency-based curriculum model for the Lao socio-political context, and with the sustainability of the work on which I had been engaged for almost two and a half years. To some extent, my thinking about sustainability was shaped by the design of the LEFAP project, which, as also described in the previous chapter, did not match the social reality into which it was being introduced, and also contained a number of dubious educational assumptions. The implementing team, constrained by time, had attempted to overcome these disjunctions by making changes that we considered to be more appropriate responses to the circumstances. For some time it had appeared that we had been successful, but as the project drew to a close, this was by no means certain. With these thoughts in mind, I knew broadly that I wanted to undertake a qualitative enquiry to ascertain the responses of Lao stakeholders to the project in greater depth than was possible through the survey responses we had collected during the project. Moreover, I wanted to ascertain their perceptions of the sustainability of outcomes of the project, and to find out if their perceptions changed over time and, if so, why.

I also knew that if I were to research anything in Laos I would need permission. I went to see a senior official in the Vice Ministry of Education whom I knew well and who was known to be keen to foster a culture of research within the ministry. She told me to write to the Vice Minister of Education telling of my research, where I wanted to go and to whom I wanted to talk. Then I should submit it via her office and she would add a letter of recommendation. Even with her support, getting the necessary permission would take a few months so, in that time, I galvanised my thoughts about what shape the research would take by returning to the LEFAP project design document to review its suggested sustainability measures. This chapter discusses the AusAID sustainability framework in relation to the findings of researchers and practitioners in the field of educational change projects in developing countries. As the chapter shows, using the issues raised as guides to refine my thinking, I was able to plan an approach to my research.

## **Galvanising thought**

The research I outlined in my letter to the Vice Minister was very broadly described. I had not yet thought about its details, though in waiting for his response I

began to think about what to call the people I would talk to and in this way began to inscribe some specificity into my intended research. ‘Respondent’ was too clinical, anonymous and distant. It did not encapsulate the relationships I already had with many of the people involved in the English for Government Officials program. ‘Informant’ has connotations of a cloak and dagger covert operation, as does ‘agent’. Nor was I keen on the term ‘actor’ which to me implies the following of a predetermined script, although I am aware that this is not the meaning commonly ascribed to it. Indeed, both ‘actor’ and ‘agent’ are primary terms employed by those who consider all human action as meaningful and purposeful. Giddens, for example, uses the terms ‘agent’ and ‘actor’ interchangeably, stating that ‘agents or actors ... have, as an aspect of what they do, the capacity to understand what they do while they do it’ (Giddens, 1984:xxii). Expanding on this, Giddens (1984:3) considers that to be a human being is to be ‘a purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon those reasons (including lying about them)’. These ‘knowledgeable agents’ have the ability to ‘make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events’ (Giddens, 1984:14). The notion of ‘agency’ is central to the institutionalisation of the English for Government Officials program. Thus, it is the terms ‘actor’ and ‘agent’ with which I have difficulty, not the concept. Finally, I settled on ‘stakeholders’ – people who, for a range of reasons, have a vested interest in the outcomes of this educational change. It is a term which embodies the notion of agency and transformative capacity (Giddens, 1984:15), the power of which, for Bourdieu, would depend on the social capital of stakeholders relative to the situation – or ‘field’ – in which they are interacting (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). I identified five Lao stakeholder groups interacting in the project field:

1. Ministry of Education officials who were charged with the responsibility of implementing the ministerial decree that all government officials know a foreign language – with priority for English – as outlined in Chapter 2.
2. Administrative officials with the responsibility of managing, funding and staffing the English for Government Officials program in each location. These can be further divided into Vientiane-based ministry officials and provincial officials. In the provinces, responsibility was shared by a three-man committee drawn from the teachers college where the program was located, and from the Office of the Governor (one from the Human Resources Department and one from the

Provincial Education Service). During the project implementation phase, the ministries funded their own programs, but the provinces were assisted by the project. This financial assistance would cease when the project ended.

3. The teachers, who may or may not have attended LEFAP training, but who taught the courses in the ministries and in the provinces. These teachers had gained a greater understanding of catering for their students' language learning needs through competency-based assessment, but faced constraints – such as their own language levels and the functional language of a Lao government official – in meeting those needs (see Chapter 4).
4. Our Lao counterparts, who were facing uncertainty about future funding to continue their program support role and whose salary 'supplements' (discussed in the previous chapter) would cease with the project ending.
5. The final Lao stakeholder group was the students in the English for Government Officials program who in Vientiane attended classes within their ministries, but who, in the provinces, were drawn from a range of workplaces to attend classes provided at the provincial teacher training colleges.

Each stakeholder group would have concerns related to its roles and responsibilities and the ways in which the current and changing situation affected them both as a group and as individuals. As members of a stakeholder group, individuals would bring their conscious and unconscious understandings (Giddens, 1984:6) of the functioning of their society, and of their positioning (Giddens, 1984:84) within the project field and within the wider society. Their responses, however, although influenced by their membership of a stakeholder group, would not be 'automised' (Bourdieu, 1979:132) by it. This is because each brings to the field their own disposition, which Bourdieu refers to as 'habitus' and defines as 'history embedded in the person and manifested as ways of talking, moving, getting on with people and making sense of the world' (Bourdieu, 1990a:131). This implies 'a sense of one's place' but also 'a sense of the other's place' (Bourdieu, 1990a:131). It assumes, Swingewood (1998:96) explains, 'a reflexive agent whose orientation to the social world is grounded in practical knowledge', which Bourdieu (1977:164) refers to as a 'feel for the game'. Individual 'feel for the game' allows for a variety of responses but involves maintaining a complex balance between 'a conscious strategy involving free choice, and non-conscious action based on common identity and a

shared culture of a common language and sentiments [and thus] choice is circumscribed by habitus and field' (Swingewood, 1998:96).

Similarly, Giddens (1993:78) points out that people regularly decide about responsibility for outcomes, and 'monitor their conduct accordingly, as well as basing their responses upon accounts/justifications/excuses offered by others'. These decisions and responses are made within a 'framework of mutual knowledge [which] depends on and draws from a "cognitive order" which is shared by a community; but while drawing on such a cognitive order the application of interpretive schemes at the same time reconstitutes that order' (Giddens, 1993:129). The shared culture of the community includes an understanding of one's positioning that 'carries with it a certain range ... of prerogatives and obligations that an actor who is accorded that identity (or is an "incumbent" of that position) may activate or carry out' (Giddens, 1984:84). The carrying out of these actions, according to Bourdieu, is underpinned by strategies to maintain or improve their social capital in its varying forms, which he defines as economic capital (material reward), symbolic capital (non-material rewards such as status, reputation and respect), and cultural capital (knowledge) (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In terms of researching sustainability, the individual agency of stakeholders is central to the institutionalisation of the English for Government Officials program, as, from their different positions within the project field and their differing individual perspectives, they make choices to maintain or change their position. Bourdieu sees such a situation as a field of struggle or a 'field of forces between forms of power, or between different species of capital' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:76).

As well as Lao stakeholders, there were three Australian stakeholder groups. Firstly, there was the donor, AusAID, whose motivations for involvement in projects in Laos are centred around promoting the liberal economic agenda with ultimate economic gain for Australia (see Chapter 3). In terms of the LEFAP project, AusAID's transformative capacity (as idealised in the project design) being limited to the duration of a project, was drawing to a close. Similarly, for the Australian Managing Agency, the second stakeholder, the responsibility for implementing the educational change was almost over. The Project Director expressed satisfaction with our (the implementing team's) work in meeting and reporting on the milestones within the specified timeframes and budget – thereby enabling the Managing Agency to receive the tied instalments of project funding. The Managing Agency's economic

agenda had been achieved and its management reputation was undamaged. The third non-Lao stakeholder group was the team of foreign advisors (myself included) for whom all three forms of capital – economic, symbolic and cultural – could be said to have motivated our involvement in the project and to have influenced our stake in, or our attitude towards, its outcome. We had also apparently fulfilled our responsibilities – without resources there was no more to be done no matter what niggling concerns there may be, or what we may feel our moral imperative to be. Australian responsibility extended only to implementation, and was considered finished when the money ceased.

From the point of withdrawal of AusAID funds, and according to the project design, responsibility for sustainability would be entirely in the hands of the Lao stakeholders. Therefore, my investigation would need to focus on the strategies they used in response to the situation in which they found themselves: on *what* actions they took, *how* this affected the institutionalisation, and, most importantly, *why* these actions were taken. Yet the purposeful and meaningful actions the Lao stakeholders took with regard to the English for Government Officials program cannot not be divorced from, on the one hand, the broader development discourse and, on the other hand, the decisions made and actions taken during the implementation phase. We had met the stated outputs (cf. Table 1, page 67) with little deviation from the specifications in the project design, but this successful (from the donor point of view) outcome raised many questions. For example, how appropriate, was the project design from the Lao point of view? To what extent did AusAID's awareness – non-awareness – of the social context during the design stage affect the program? How did Lao stakeholders view the decisions we (the implementing team) had made? Were the project outcomes beneficial enough for each stakeholder group and individuals within those groups to be committed to their sustainability? Did the Lao stakeholders see the Australian stakeholders as having fulfilled their responsibilities? What lessons about the sustainability of project benefits could be learned from listening to the Lao voices? Such were the questions that began to give greater specificity to my proposed research on sustainability.

## **Gathering 'foreigner' views**

AusAID claims to be committed to sustainability, which Ram Babu (1994:10) refers to as 'the ultimate test of development efforts'. In 1997, AusAID's Committee

of Review released a document recommending that the ‘objective of the Australian aid program should be to assist developing countries to reduce poverty through sustainable economic and social development’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997:12). This objective has become AusAID’s ‘central integrating factor’ (AusAID, 2001b) and is reflected in AusAID’s strategy paper for development cooperation with Laos. The paper states that AusAID’s goal is to ‘work in partnership with Lao PDR to assist in the reduction of poverty and the achievement of sustainable development’ (AusAID, 1999a:4).

Development projects, however, are finite, and by definition, not themselves sustainable. Consequently, AusAID refers to the ‘sustainable benefits’ of projects, i.e. the ‘continuation of benefits after major assistance from a donor has been completed’ (AusAID, 2000:9). Others (e.g. Bamberger & Cheema, 1990; Ram Babu, 1994; Russell, 1993; Verspoor, 1989) have similarly defined sustainability in the context of development assistance projects. Verspoor (1989:29), looking specifically at educational change projects, refers to the continuation of benefits as “institutionalisation”, which he defines as ‘the extent to which the program is routinely applied and can be sustained as part of normal administrative and classroom practice’. This definition has continued to inform mainstream development practice with no alternative definitions surfacing in the literature.

The sustainability of benefits has, however, been notoriously difficult to achieve, with AusAID admitting to ‘the frequent decline in sustainability of benefits following project completion’ (AusAID, 2000:28). In 1999, the year implementation of the LEFAP project began, an AusAID review of its projects found that ‘the lack of a clear and explicit sustainability strategy was a major risk factor in all the projects assessed’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000:1). Consequently, AusAID subsequently published a manual ‘to provide AusAID staff and ... implementing partners with practical guidance on how to address sustainability issues more explicitly and effectively throughout the activity management cycle (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000:1), i.e. throughout ‘the sequence of stages through which an activity passes, and includes [project] identification and initial assessment, preparation, appraisal, implementation and monitoring, and completion and evaluation’ (AusAID, 2000:4).

While the earlier stages of the LEFAP project activity cycle predate the publication of this manual, it was nevertheless the approach ‘already developed for



two new education projects' in Laos (AusAID, 1999a:22). The LEFAP project was one of those two and its design document contains a Risk Matrix (AusAID, 1999b:106) specifying the risks to the commissioning, execution and sustainability of the project, an assessment of the likelihood of each risk and its impact should it eventuate, how each can be mitigated, and who is responsible for taking the mitigating action. The section of the Risk Matrix devoted to sustainability, included in the table below, shows three risks, only one of which was considered to be an Australian responsibility.

**Table 5: Risks to sustainability identified in the project design document**

Risk		Risk rating		Mitigating measures	By whom
		Likelihood	Impact		
1	Lao personnel do not accept changes to ELT practices developed as a result of the project	low	moderate	Ensure that changes are made in consultation with Lao personnel	Australian Managing Contractor
2	Project trained personnel resign or are transferred	moderate	high	Ensure that appropriate incentive systems are in place to maximise staff retention	Government of Laos counterpart agencies
3	The institutions strengthened as a result of this project are unable to meet recurrent costs, particularly salaries and on-going HRD	moderate	high	Develop strategies for securing and/or generation of sufficient funds	Government of Laos counterpart agencies

The matrix raises a number of questions. The first risk, that the Lao personnel do not accept the educational changes, was considered low, and to have only a moderate effect on sustainability if that should happen. This, in itself, is a curious assessment. How did those who made it imagine that an unacceptable program would continue to run once the project finished? Acceptability is allied with appropriateness and is an issue that had been of concern to many scholars and practitioners over the years. In the wider field of educational transfer these concerns have centred on the possible erosion of local values brought about by the underlying values of the education model conflicting with those of the local culture (e.g. Carnoy, 1974; Hall, 1989; Kumar, 1979; Le Sourd, 1990; Watson, 1982) and about the high failure rate of such transfers (Crossley, 1984; Lee et al., 1988). This prompted Watson (1994:95) to express the hope that the harsh economic realities of the 1990s would force aid donors to evaluate the relevance of proposed transfers if high costs and wastage were to be curtailed. Later, however, he noted that globalisation's pressures for conformity and

homogeneity have increased pressures on developing countries to accept academic theories developed to suit the needs of industrialised countries (Watson, 2000:275).

In the field of English language teaching, both the appropriateness of the content of English language courses and the appropriateness of the dominant Western methodological paradigm (Communicative Language Teaching) have received considerable attention. The issue of the cultural appropriateness of content was raised in the 1980s with the realisation that, with the rise of English as the lingua franca of international communication, the socio-cultural norms embedded in the materials and the pedagogical practice of native-English speaking practitioners were increasingly irrelevant (c.f. Kachru, 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Nelson, 1992; Strevens, 1992; Tickoo, 1995). Braj Kachru discussed the 'consciously cultivated' myths about the teaching and learning of English, one being:

*The Interlocutor Myth*

That across cultures, English is functionally learnt to interact with the native speakers of English, American, Australian or British. Actually, most of the interaction in English takes place among and between its non-native speakers: Indians with Sri Lankans, Germans with Singaporeans, Japanese with Malaysians, and so on (Kachru, 1995:8).

Furthermore, in such interactions, 'the *English* English or *American* English conventions of language are not only irrelevant; these may even be considered inappropriate by the interlocutors' (Kachru, 1992b:357). Consequently, Tickoo advised that

in producing materials for social survival and interaction, judgements of appropriateness may have to take into account the differences between the behavioural systems and worldviews of different social/ethnic groups (Tickoo, 1988:42).

Krasnick, writing of the English language communication needs in the ASEAN context, advised that English language professional needed to consider

the pan-regional communication norms and values that will be the target cultural context for English as the regional lingua franca, to analyse local cultural traditions that will have to be taken into account therein (Krasnick, 1995:92).

As described in the previous chapter, these are issues with which we grappled when we attempted to develop materials more suited to the needs of Lao government officials than could be achieved by using commercial materials (as was expected in the project design). In the development of these materials, however, we were constrained by time, knowledge and the reduced number of counterparts for much of

the project's duration. Furthermore, while the dual-culture (Australian and Lao) nature of the team made it possible to take into account the local cultural traditions, it was limiting in terms of understanding and presenting the pan-regional communication norms and values among the ASEAN nations. Thus, while anecdotal and formal survey feedback indicated that the materials were well received by the Lao stakeholders, a more in-depth and face to face probing could reveal concerns.

The second issue of concern in the field of English language teaching is that of the appropriateness of transferring methodologies socially constructed in Western advanced technological countries. The concern echoes those of the broader field of educational transfer, i.e. that the values underlying the model differ considerably from those of the culture into which the transfer is being attempted. This gave rise to much questioning and debate (c.f. Anderson, 1993; Denham, 1992; Ellis, 1996; Li Xiaojun, 1984) about the suitability of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches, particularly in relation to its ideological underpinnings. Savignon, for example, notes that

by encouraging students to ask for information, seek clarification, to use circumlocution and whatever other linguistic and non-linguistic resources they could muster to negotiate meaning ... teachers were inevitably encouraging learners to take risks to speak in other than memorised patterns (Savignon, 1991:264).

Furthermore, classrooms are described as learner-centred and teachers as 'facilitators' which, Larsen-Freeman (1999:2) points out, breaks down hierarchical relationships in the classroom by de-emphasising the power of the teacher.

Such concerns have abated with growing evidence of teachers' ability to 'both filter the method to make it appropriate to the local cultural norms, and to redefine the cultural norms embedded in the method itself' (Ellis, 1996:213). Two examples of research in Vietnam demonstrate how teachers 'implement new ideas at the same time as incorporating the traditional features valued in their educational systems' (Lewis & McCook, 2002:146) and how teachers

have satisfied both their global needs, as teachers of English, who succeed in getting their students involved in English communicative activities, and their local needs, as good Vietnamese teachers who take into account socially-expected factors (Phan Le Ha, 2004:57).

This accords with my own earlier research into the transfer of CLT to Laos (cf. Achren, 1996; Achren & Keovilay, 1998) which found that, while classroom

behaviours had changed considerably over a period of time, the teachers had employed a number of strategies to adapt the approach to enable both themselves and their students to work within culturally acceptable parameters. As Larsen-Freeman (1999:2) noted,

assuming that teachers are the victims of ideological imposition and disregarding their agency in the teaching/learning process seems just as much an affront as assuming that new methodologies are superior to traditional ones.

I could find no reference in the literature to the transfer of competency-based language teaching practices. As discussed in the previous chapter, the assessment practices central to a competency-based approach differ radically to those prevailing in Laos, which both demonstrate and foster the Lao sense of community while making sure that no one loses face (cf. Emblem, 1996; Ng Shui Meng, 1991) as exemplified in the assessment practice recorded in the journal entry on page 79. The competency-based approach, on the other hand, is concerned with individual progress that can be accounted for in a transparent manner. However, as Larsen-Freeman (1999:4) advised, ‘Whether or not a particular pedagogical interaction should be considered appropriate pedagogy must be decided by politically and individually-sensitive local educators themselves’. On this understanding, the current study acknowledges the Lao stakeholders as the ultimate arbiters, whose actions will modify the model or perhaps result in its ultimate rejection. The study seeks to understand those actions.

The second risk identified in the LEFAP project design document, that project-trained staff resign or are transferred, was considered of moderate likelihood with a high impact should it happen. To mitigate this risk, it was advised that the Lao government maximise staff retention with appropriate incentives. However, the nation’s financial situation raises questions about the adequacy of this advice as a mitigating strategy; all the more so as the project was designed at a time when economic conditions were deteriorating as a result of the regional economic crisis (ADB, 2000:175). The value of suggesting that skilled staff not be transferred is also questionable as it is common practice for organisations to transfer their employees to contexts in which their skills can be best utilised. The likelihood of this happening is high, perhaps inevitable, in a country such as Laos with its chronic shortage of skilled personnel. Certainly, two of our counterparts were already spending time attending meetings and translating documents in preparation for a major ADB education project. Without them, little work was being done on the development of the

supplementary materials the counterparts had planned to develop during the final (advisorless) months of project funding. Thus, at the ELRC the transfer of staff (to the next project) was already in process. How would this affect the capacity of the ELRC to continue both its original function of supporting English language teachers in general, and its new function of supporting the delivery of the English for Government Officials program in the ministries and provinces?

The wider literature on educational change projects had little to say about the transfer or resignation of trained staff. It was, however, mentioned in a conference paper by two Cambodian lecturers/managers of the English Department at the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In a critique of the AusAID-funded University of Phnom Penh English and Education Project (UPPEEP), the paper linked the retention of staff with the generation of income (the second risk to LEFAP sustainability as shown in Table 1 (page 67). The paper pointed out that income-generating activities were essential if the English Department were to be able to offer a financial supplement to the low government salaries (Suos Man & Sok Luong Chan, 2002). However, the writers were highly critical of AusAID's lack of attention to developing their capacity to do so during its four-year project. The writers stated that 'while the UPPEEP certainly built the capacity of the English Department to deliver the B.Ed program, ... it was less successful in developing and putting in place mechanisms for sustainability' (Suos Man & Sok Luong Chan, 2002:78) because UPPEEP 'never encouraged income-generating activities to take place at the IFL' (Suos Man & Sok Luong Chan, 2002:83). In the view of these English Department managers, 'sustainability mechanisms, including income generation and how to manage this, need to be incorporated into capacity building strategies' (Suos Man & Sok Luong Chan, 2002:85).

The issue of the generation of funds to cover recurrent costs, the third and final risk identified in the project design document, had previously been raised in an evaluation report on an AusAID-funded vocational education project in the Philippines implemented between 1990 and 1994. The following description of this project shows it to have had much in common with the LEFAP project. The report stated that the project involved both national and local components and included 'curriculum development, in-service training of technical teachers and administrators, preparing and disseminating learning material, organisational development, and

strengthening of inter-agency linkages’ at the national level. At the local level it aimed to strengthen ‘nine TVE [Technical and Vocational Education] schools by providing equipment, training and improved curriculum’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998:viii). The evaluation found the sustainability of the project benefits were constrained by the ability of the schools to generate sufficient income to cover the increased costs required for utilities, materials, repair and maintenance (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998:ix).

Despite AusAID’s Lao development strategy paper (AusAID, 1999a:11) noting that the provision of recurrent costs was frequently a difficulty for the Lao government, under LEFAP the development of strategies for securing and/or generating funds was the sole responsibility of the Lao stakeholders (cf. Table 5, page 101). While our implementing team was mindful of keeping costs low, and seed money was available for the first printing of books – the sale of which would cover future printing costs – no specific attention was paid to the issue of other recurrent costs. Nor did the design incorporate assisting the Lao government to develop the required strategies. The delineation of responsibilities was underscored six months before the end of the project when AusAID refused the Lao Ministry of Education’s request for assistance in developing the capacity of the staff at the English Language Resource Centre to develop and manage income generation activities.

The refusal was inconsistent with AusAID’s own guidelines, which stress the analysis of the sustainability of benefits ‘within the broader context of country-specific circumstances’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000:2). Considering that moving towards a market economy is the guiding paradigm of the development discourse, and the generation of income was a radical step for the Ministry to be considering, this decision was questionable. It was also inconsistent with other development efforts urging privatisation and ‘user-pays’ strategies in education (ADB, 2000; Alexander, 2001:303; Jones, 1997:125; 1998:152). The ADB education sector report refers to another educational innovation in Laos – the establishment of a Teacher Development Centre (TDC) at the National University – as an example of wasted effort without a realistic assessment of capabilities of the TDC to sustain itself; and of planning on the part of both the donor and the Lao government to ensure that it can. Without this, ‘the general shortage of recurrent funds means there is no recurrent budget to implement the new capabilities, and the newly invested [sic] in staff and facilities remain unused’ (ADB, 2000:209). The report further states that ‘the

question is not whether there is a need for such services – no one would question that such services would be helpful. The issue is one of effective demand – whether there will be someone, some group, some way that the services will be paid for, at the prices and in sufficient quantity that the facility can be sustained’ (ADB, 2000:209).

The parallels are clear between the development and sustainability of the TDC and the capacity of the ELRC to provide a quality outreach service to the teacher training colleges and ministries. The ADB’s concluding remarks about the TDC are also highly relevant given the Ministry of Education’s request for assistance with income generating activities and AusAID’s refusal. The ADB report states that ‘project activities during the life of the project should have included training in self-sustainability – how the services of the new institution [the TDC] can be sold – so as to provide recurrent funds after external project funding is completed (ADB, 2000:209).

Those left to manage the previously mentioned Cambodian UPPEEP project raised a related issue not included in the LEFAP Risk Matrix (Table 5, page 101) – that of building management capacity. Again, the Cambodian writers were critical of AusAID’s attention to their overall ability to undertake these management responsibilities once the project ended. They considered that ‘We did not have the capacity to manage and administer the B.Ed Program. Our training under ... UPPEEP was in English language and teacher training for secondary schools’ (Suos Man & Sok Luong Chan, 2002 p.83). Moreover, while ‘lecturers were trained to conduct meetings, keep records, stock take resources’, this training ‘was in administration not management, which would include leadership, decision-making, financial management, etc’ (Suos Man & Sok Luong Chan, 2002:84). This is an issue addressed over a decade earlier by Verspoor (1989) who, after examining 21 case studies of educational change projects in developing countries, found that management capacity was of more importance for institutionalisation than teacher quality (Verspoor, 1989:122-123) and, consequently, it was ‘nearly always’ necessary to pay attention to the training of national administrative staff (Verspoor, 1989:158). Verspoor (1993:107) later extended this to include regional staff, recommending that the assistance strategy ‘strengthen the institutional capacity for strategic planning and management at the national or regional level, and for operation planning and implementation at the district and school levels’.

Under the LEFAP project, as described in the previous chapter, capacity building for the management of the English for Government Officials program was centred on the English Language Resource Centre in Vientiane and was narrowly focussed on policies, systems and plans for standardisation and articulation of the courses developed (see Table 1, page 67). Management training was not extended to administrators in the individual ministries and provinces for whom only one central meeting was held. This was despite Lao management capacity being an often cited constraint to development (e.g. ADB, 2000; AusAID, 1999a; DFAT, 1997). Therefore, opportunities were missed for the sharing of experiences and problems, as recommended by the ADB in specific reference to successful sustainability of educational changes at the local level in Laos (ADB, 2000:174).

While the LEFAP project design made no mention of management training and opportunities for problem sharing amongst program administrators, these could have been incorporated had there been sufficient time. Leach (1999:389) argues that

the dominance of economic considerations renders the aid industry an ineffectual means of generating sustainable development in developing countries ... In particular the rationalist planning model that underpins the concept of the development project, with its ... insistence on tangible outcomes and short timescales, does not allow for development in the sense of genuine capacity-building to take place.

This agrees with Sharps' (1998:143) observation that,

Greater flexibility is needed in deciding on the time-scale of a project ... Unreasonable time constraints prevent the development of strategies for dealing with the real-world situation found in institutions, which may not have been apparent from the brief visits made by aid personnel at the initial planning stages.

Such views have been articulated for a number of years. In 1993, for example, Verspoor argued that while the 'Project Model', which 'emphasises the detailed costing of investment inputs and the careful planning for their timely delivery' serves large infrastructure projects well, it is 'much less suitable for broad support for basic education which requires investments and improvement in many widely dispersed schools' (Verspoor, 1993:105). Sharp (1998:144) concludes that 'the pendulum has, in effect, swung too far in its demand for accountability. Greater flexibility is necessary for achieving development aims'.

The literature also contains discussions relating sustainability of project benefits to the commitment of local stakeholders for the educational change (e.g.



Bamberger & Cheema, 1990; Marpaung & Kirk, 1997; Russell, 1993; Verspoor, 1989). Marpaung and Kirk (1997) concluded that the sustainability of the Indonesian English language project on which they were working would ultimately depend on the commitment and drive of language centre management and staff, while the commitment of the hierarchy would be shown by their support for the generation of funds. Russell (1993:268) has suggested that the potential for sustainability can be measured through the commitment to the program of the local stakeholders after project funds have been withdrawn. An ADB report on the Lao education sector also referred to the motivation and commitment of teachers as being necessary to support sustainability (ADB, 2000:174). Burke, Elliott and Stewart (1997:21), commenting on an education project in Papua New Guinea, suggested that such commitment enables the ‘the on-going redevelopment of teaching and learning ideas in the *minds* and *practices* of those involved’ (italics in the original) and further suggested that the project’s focus on the development of reflective practitioners was, therefore, a strong facilitating factor in its institutionalisation. However, O’Donoghue (1994) criticised that project as being an example of the inappropriate transfer of a popular Western educational practice to a developing country, and argues that the project focus on developing the ‘reflective teacher’ failed to acknowledge the reality of the Papua New Guinean context in that what the lecturers themselves needed at that point in time was to upgrade their content knowledge. He argues that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to be reflective when struggling with the subject matter.

## **Designing the research**

The review of the literature, combined with my own experiences, was instrumental in shaping my research design. Firstly, there is an inextricable link between appropriateness and sustainability, i.e. that for an educational model to be sustainable, it must be appropriate for the socio-cultural and political context into which it was being implemented – or more precisely that it must be possible for knowledgeable local agents to modify the model in such a way that it is rendered appropriate. From this it follows that Lao stakeholder commitment to, and willingness to take responsibility for, the program’s on-going funding and staffing will ultimately depend on how appropriate they perceive the model to be and how, if necessary, they are able to modify it. Thirdly, the literature and my experience of the project suggest that, no matter how appropriate the educational model might be, its sustainability is

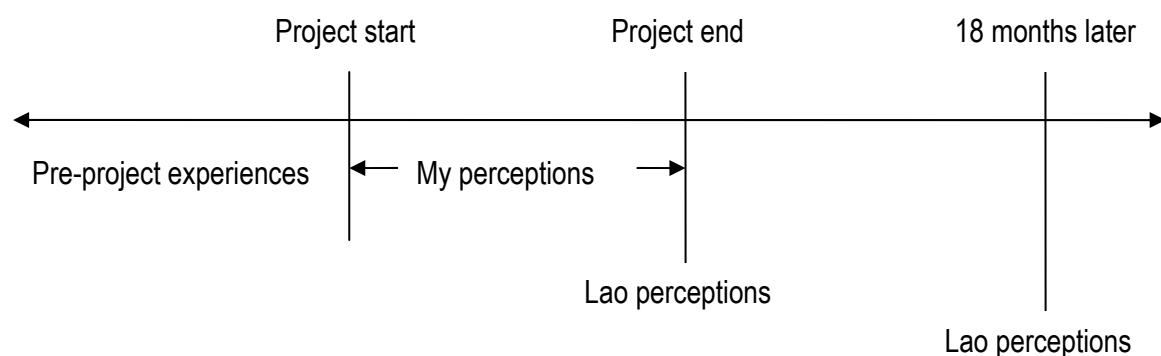
jeopardised if the project's design does not take into account the social reality and provide appropriate support for the educational change.

Based on these three key points, I finalised the research design for the first stage of my fieldwork, which I would conduct as the project funding was drawing to a close. I determined that:

1. The primary purpose during this first fieldwork phase would be to investigate how the program was experienced by the Lao stakeholders and in what ways it was meaningful to them (Greene, 2000:986).
2. Lao perceptions of the sustainability of the project would best be determined by focussing on their perceptions of the appropriateness of the curriculum model and of the project design.
3. Their perceptions of appropriateness would influence their commitment to planning for when project funding had ceased. In a circular manner, investigating Lao stakeholder plans and concerns would reveal further insights into their perceptions of appropriateness of both the model and the design.

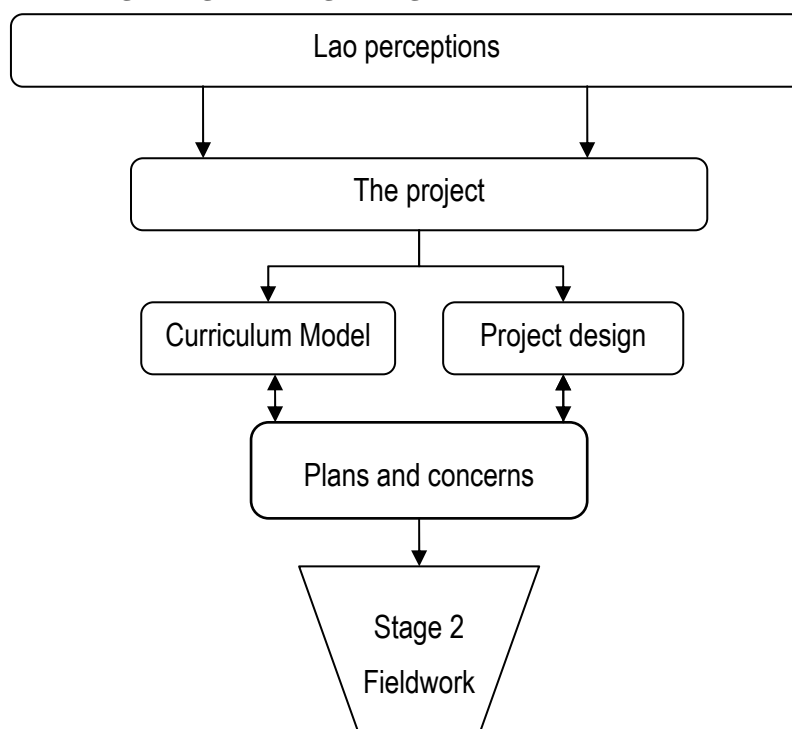
The first stage of field research would give me a broad overview of the commitment of individuals and stakeholder groups as funding drew to a close. However, as sustainability cannot be determined by future plans or current commitment, and as the acceptability of the program had the potential to change over time, I planned to return at a later date to observe how the predictions of individuals and the plans of stakeholder groups had come to fruition. The research would draw on my own perceptions of working in Laos over a number of years, and on the project in particular, as already narrated in Chapter 4. Primarily, however, it would focus on Lao perceptions at two particular points in time: the first, at the end of the project (Stage 1), and the second, eighteen months after project funding had ceased (Stage 2):

**Figure 2: Research plan**



The exact nature of the investigations in Stage 2 of the research would depend on the findings of the first stage of the field work. Thus, I adopted an ‘emergent enquiry design’ (Greene, 2000:987) with a ‘funnel structure in which the research [would be] progressively focused over its course’ (Walsh, 1998:230). The design of my research leading from Stage 1 to Stage 2 can thus be summarised in the following diagram:

**Figure 3: Research design: Stage 1 leading to Stage 2**



In order to put this design into action, I planned to visit each of the locations where the English for Government Officials program was being conducted to observe the program and talk to individuals within the stakeholder groups. This would involve travelling to five provinces and visiting the seven venues in Vientiane conducting the courses. My intention in so doing was to ‘understand the meaningfulness of human actions and interactions – as experienced and constructed by the actors – in a given context’ (Greene, 2000:986). Thus, I planned to conduct a two-phase ethnographic study based on ‘on-site observations in order to develop a descriptive portrayal of what happens ... and how this portrayal varies across contexts’ (Greene, 2000:988) and, moreover, why it happens.

In very broad terms, my observations would be informed by my understanding that ‘human behaviour is continually constructed and reconstructed on the basis of

people's interpretation of the situation they are in' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995:8), and that 'these constructions are multiple and plural, contingent and contextual' (Greene, 2000:986). However, while 'competent actors can normally report discursively about their intentions in, and reasons for, acting as they do, they cannot necessarily do so of their motives' (Giddens, 1984:6). For this I would draw on my Lao socio-cultural understandings and intercultural communicative competence to interpret my observations of clues, such as non-verbal language. Thus, my primary research tool would be participant observation, described by Denzin (1989:157) as 'a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing respondents ... direct participation and observation, and introspection'. The gathering of information would involve 'genuinely social interaction in the field with the subject of study, direct observation of relevant events, some formal and a great deal of informal interviewing, some counting ... [T]he collection of documents and artefacts, and open-endedness in the direction the study takes' (McCall & Simmons, 1969:1).

Not wanting to restrict the responses of the stakeholders during interviews, for the first fieldwork phase, I devised broad, open-ended question guides (Patton, 1990:288) to elicit information about individual views of acceptability and potential sustainability as well as foreseeable difficulties and plans (see Appendix 5). During formal interviews with eighteen administrators and more conversational interviews with twenty seven teachers, the question guides were designed to allow further probing depending on the responses, which in turn could also further shape the question guide as the research proceeded and themes emerged. To this information would be added field and classroom observations, discussions with counterparts and students, program statistics, and photographs.

The ultimate plan in developing this research structure was, as a participant observer, to facilitate what Lincoln and Guba (2000:166) have termed a multivoice reconstruction. I was aware, however, that this would be my interpretation of the Lao voices, *my* reconstruction of *their* construction of reality. As I am also an 'historically and culturally constructed individual' (Denzin, 1997:87), the observations would be made 'within a mediated framework, that is a framework of symbols and cultural meanings given to [researchers] by those aspects of their life histories they bring to the observational setting (Vidich & Lyman, 2000:39), and, consequently, the themes identified within the stakeholder narratives 'emerge from the researcher's interaction within the field and questions about the data' (Charmaz, 2000:522). I was acutely

aware of these power relationships between the ‘western’ researcher and those ‘being researched’. As Giroux (1992:26), drawing on Foucault, has noted:

The question here is the issue of who speaks, under what conditions, for whom, and how knowledge is constructed and translated within and between different communities located within asymmetrical relations of power.

Concerns about the intersubjectivity of researcher and researched and the consequent ‘truth’ of qualitative research has given rise to what Denzin (1997:3) referred to as a ‘triple crisis of representation, legitimation and praxis’. All constructions, being ‘historically, racially and sexually located’ can only be ‘partial and incomplete’ (Lincoln, 1995) and, therefore, there can ‘never be a final, accurate representation of what was meant or said’ (Denzin, 1997:5). Such concerns have given rise to much discussion in the literature about how to deal with observer bias, or subjectivity, and by what criteria qualitative research can be judged as legitimate or valid (e.g. Hammersley, 1990; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Maxwell, 1992; Roman & Apple, 1990; Smith & Deemer, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggested credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as criteria on which to judge the authenticity and trustworthiness of a qualitative evaluation. Hammersley (1990:61) suggested that the criteria be credibility and plausibility i.e. ‘whether we judge it as likely to be true given our existing knowledge’. However, Smith and Deemer (2000:881-882) point out that criteria such as these are in themselves socially and historically conditioned judgements, although they pragmatically conclude that ‘criteria should not be thought of in abstraction, but as a list of features that we think, or more or less agree at any given time and place, characterize good versus bad inquiry. This is a list that can be challenged, added to, subtracted from, modified, and so on, as it is applied to actual practice – in actual application in actual inquiries’ (Smith & Deemer, 2000:894).

In this somewhat fluid, non-definitive situation, ‘the ethnographer’s authority remains under assault’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:17). This is perhaps particularly so if we include a third party – the reader – in the construction of reality. Denzin (1997:41) describes the reader as ‘one who is ready to hear, see, and listen to the voices, images, and sounds of a text. In so doing, the reader renders the text intelligible and meaningful’. He adds that a written text ‘becomes a montage (and a *mise-en-scène*) – a meeting place where original voices, their inscriptions (as transcribed texts), and the writer’s interpretations come together’ (Denzin, 1997:41) but that the text ‘remains

always anchored in the interactional experiences of the reflexive ethnographer' (Denzin, 1997:19). In my own case, I would include in these experiences a lengthy engagement with Lao people, both in Laos and in Australia, which has equipped me with particular (although inevitably partial) socio-cultural and linguistic understandings. Following Goodman (1998:57), I took as my guide 'the rather old fashioned view that at the heart of good research lies good description ... [with which to] provide readers with an opportunity to envision the lives of informants and then apply what they vicariously observe to their own unique situations'. In agreement with Wolf (1992:5), I believe ethnographers 'can only convey their own understandings of their observations ... The better the observer, the more likely she is to catch her informants' understanding of the meaning of their experiences; the better the writer, the more likely she is to be able to convey that meaning to an interested reader'. Paraphrasing and contextualising Denzin (1997:87), I value and seek to produce a work that speaks about a particular human experience taking place over a short period of time in Lao socio-economic development.

It was at this point in the conceptual development of the research project that permission to begin my field work arrived from the Vice Minister of Education. The permission allowed me to seek access to personnel in the provinces but could not cover the other ministries in Vientiane. This was because the Ministry of Education had direct working relationships with all those involved with the provincial programs – personnel in the teachers colleges, the Human Resource Departments and Provincial Education Services – but could not influence decisions made by other ministries. I would have to negotiate my own access to each of them individually. This was daunting, especially as I had no 'patron' to open doors for me in these other ministries. I contemplated confining the research to the provinces but was concerned that in so doing valuable comparisons between the city and the provincial venues would be lost. I hesitated.

## **Precipitated into action**

My inaction ended when I was precipitated into the field by an invitation from my patron in the ministry to accompany her on a trip to one of the provinces. In effect she was conferring legitimacy on my undertaking. She was continuing to open doors. She also supported me by agreeing to a former counterpart accompanying me on all my provincial field trips. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement. The trips, for

which I paid, gave my counterpart the opportunity to conduct some of her official Ministry of Education work, and to catch up with relatives and friends. To my benefit, she smoothed my way and acted as interpreter when interviewing administrators, a situation in which, regrettably, my formal Lao is not adequate for the task. In addition, she played a valuable role in giving me feedback as we later mulled over the day's events.

In each of the five provinces, I formally interviewed representatives of each local program coordination committee. Their interviews followed a similar pattern to that recorded in the following journal extract.

*JOURNAL ENTRY: Interviewing*

*In the afternoon, we all, including the college director, drive to the Office of the Governor and sit in the Head of Personnel's office. The Director speaks first, explaining our presence. Then the Senior Ministry of Education Official speaks briefly about the purpose of her visit and then my counterpart speaks, telling him more about what I am doing there. The others leave to go about their business and I interview him with my counterpart's assistance. I say a few words in Lao first, apologizing that my Lao isn't as good as it should be and that I need my counterpart's help in a situation such as this. In turn, he apologises for his English. The few words in Lao have, however, put him more at ease and the interview goes well, after some initial diffidence about the use of a tape recorder to which he agrees so long as he can listen to it overnight. The next day, with the comment 'Boh mi phan ha' – 'No problems', he returned the cassette. (January 2002)*

My interviews with the teachers of each provincial program required no interpreter and were more conversational in nature than those with administrators, reflecting our already established relationships. Teacher interviews took place in the staffroom or a vacant classroom and were also tape recorded and backed up by notes. While the interviewing of administrators was targeted, the sample of teachers was opportunistic and depended on who had some time available in their busy schedule. The teacher-coordinators, however, always made themselves available. I observed, and made notes on, the classes of those I interviewed, partly to confirm their perceptions of what was happening in class, but also to leave open the opportunity for student comments as had occurred during my work on the project and which had raised initial questions about sustainability (see Chapter 4). I did not, during this first

phase of the research, either interview or survey students, the relevant questions being not yet apparent.

In Vientiane, teachers were equally generous with their time. Most chose to make themselves available to answer my questions by meeting me at the English Language Resource Centre. I was less successful in securing permission to visit their workplaces, and so data on their classes (of which I observed only two), and from their administrators is far less than I was able to obtain in the provinces. While this restricts the data concerning the Vientiane-based program during this first phase of the study, the information from the teachers demonstrated the same range of concerns, challenges and enthusiasms as those in the provinces.

In Vientiane I also conducted formal interviews with two senior officials in the Ministry of Education. These took place after viewpoints in a number of other locations had been explored. My discussion guide was designed on the assumption that, as project administrators, they had a broader view of the program, and therefore a particular perspective on themes emerging in other locations. The seven counterparts also had an overview of the program gained from their roles during the LEFAP project as advisors and trainers. Conversational interviews with individual counterparts and informal conversations were invaluable for the on-going opportunities to gain 'insider' interpretations of actions and events to add to the picture that was emerging. In this way I sought feedback and monitored for bias in my perceptions. To these Lao views, I added those of 'knowledgeable' foreigner advisors by seeking views on sustainability in recorded conversations with six 'Westerners' who worked in Vientiane with some connection to the English for Government Officials program.

The information gathered was initially analysed by coding chunks of transcribed text reflecting themes and sub-themes identified before, during and after the data collection, i.e. drawn from the literature, from experience and induced from the data (c.f. Ryan & Bernard, 2000:780). The linkages between these themes was analysed by what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as the 'constant comparison method' i.e. by comparing and contrasting the (thematically coded) views, values and actions of individuals within stakeholder groups, and by comparing them across groups, with the aim of identifying areas of convergence and divergence.

Some foreign advisors were dubious that I would get anything other than the 'party-line' or considered that I would be told what I wanted to hear – particularly as I



was a former advisor on the project. Mindful of this, I was careful in my structuring of questions, in my listening and observations, and in triangulating information across multiple sources and view points. Without the permission from the Minister, the information I was able to access would have been more limited. As had happened in the Vientiane-based Ministry programs, some people may have chosen not to talk to me at all. However, never did I feel that people felt compelled to talk to me, and only rarely did I sense that people were keeping information from me. In fact, as the next chapter demonstrates, some people were remarkably candid.

## Chapter 6: Lao responses

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### *A snapshot of a field trip*

*We reach Xiengkhouang after just half an hour in a smallish plane. We're met at the airport by a teachers college driver who takes us to the college. Built about 5 years ago with Japanese aid, it sits among undulating hills surrounded by mountains. I'm unprepared for the wind whipping across this high plain. It's a novelty for us from Vientiane where the 'cool season' rarely drops to temperatures such as these and where a breeze – cool or otherwise – is even rarer. 'Naow nohk?' – 'Isn't it cold?' – becomes a constant refrain accompanied by giggles from the hardier locals.*

*After meeting with the Director and Vice Director we all leave the office and wander down the hill, with people remarking on the scenery, 'Sabai ta' – 'It's beautiful', or more literally, 'comfortable on the eye'. The Director is talking about the new road to the buildings and the poles up the middle signifying the impending arrival of electricity. Until it does, the college will continue to make sparing use of a generator. Coming up the road are two (ethnic) 'minority students' who stop and cheerily offer their greetings. I'm surprised at their lack of shyness before the 'hua na' – the important people. They ask where I'm from. Someone asks them what year they're in. Having completed primary school themselves, they're studying a special teacher-training program for ethnic minority people. They will return to their villages next year and teach the children there. They look very young.*

*At the entrance to the college is a small open-fronted shop with a corrugated iron veranda and a dirt floor. It sells the usual provisions – eggs which can be bought individually, tiny packets of detergent, shampoo, tea, sugar, salt. Inside is a weaving loom. We sit at a table under the veranda. A family of geese scavenge nearby. Tea is brought by a young woman who is very familiar with the college director. A bottle of beer appears and the 'cup of friendship' makes its rounds. The Vice Director leaves and comes back with another bottle. The cup does another round. It's windy and chilly. I button my jacket. Conversation ranges over many topics during which I discover that the young woman serving in the shop is the Director's daughter. She's studying in Vientiane and has made the arduous trip back through the mountains by bus for the semester break. And this is the Director's shop with which he supplements his official salary.*

## Perspectives

Starting in the mountains in the north-east in the cool season, my field trips to five Lao provinces ended in the hot season in the southernmost province of Champasak. Anyone with an eye to the weather would have done this in the reverse order but, as described in the previous chapter, my schedule was dictated by opportunity not planning. Between each provincial trip, my counterpart and I returned to our base in Vientiane where I continued researching the appropriateness and potential sustainability of the English for Government Officials program. The data I was able to collect in the provinces was far richer than in Vientiane, partly because the support of the Ministry of Education opened provincial administrators' doors, partly because concern for decentralisation saw the national coordinator's attention focused firmly on the provinces, and partly because the provincial field trips always involved a mixture of the formal and social as presented in the 'snapshot' that began this chapter.

These social events presented opportunities for further observation and discussion, thus contributing to a deeper understanding, on my part, of Lao perspectives at the point in time when the LEFAP project funding was drawing to a close. The Lao stories of their experiences during the project<sup>23</sup>, and their hopes and fears for the future, are presented below around the central themes of acceptability and commitment. Through these stories, this chapter elaborates on the disjunction between design and reality as I perceived it while working on the project. The Lao voices confirm the suggestion in the previous chapter that local commitment for funding and staffing (and, therefore, to sustainability) is contingent on stakeholder perceptions of the acceptability of the curriculum. However, 'acceptability' is revealed as a complex and, at that point in time, unstable interplay of cultural, political, pedagogic and pragmatic considerations. Analysis of the Lao responses to the project reveals a complexity that defies the simple delineations of responsibility for mitigating the risks to sustainability identified in the LEFAP project design

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<sup>23</sup> The teachers whose views are recorded in this thesis were among the most proficient in the program. I have chosen to leave the inaccuracies as they were in the spoken text in order to add to the picture of the reality into which the English language program was being implemented so that the reader may better form an understanding of the difficulties facing the teachers and their students. However, where the meaning is obscure, I have rendered a more conventional version in brackets. Conversations with students have been similarly treated. For the most part, conversations with administrators were through an interpreter.

document (AusAID, 1999b), as discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, the analysis of AusAID's response to the socio-political reality suggests a further risk to the sustainability of project benefits. As this chapter argues, the analysis raises questions about the nature or extent of AusAID's commitment and exposes the disjunction between AusAID rhetoric and reality.

## **Acceptability**

As discussed in Chapter 5, the project design document had identified the acceptability (to the Lao stakeholders) of the educational changes as being imperative to the sustainability of the project, and that it was the responsibility of the Australian team to ensure acceptability. As project funding drew to a close, two primary keys to acceptability emerged from the discussions with Lao stakeholders – the Lao content of the courses and the competency-based approach itself. While both were acknowledged across all stakeholder groups as contributing significantly to improved outcomes, and hence to the acceptability of the program, both also emerged as being personally, politically and/or culturally problematic.

### **Lao content**

For administrators, the acceptability of the courses rested on the improved work-related communications they observed once course graduates returned to their workplaces. Three quarters of the administrators interviewed commented that students could function in English in their workplaces if they had to talk to foreigners, attend meetings or travel abroad for seminars. One commented, *'In this time of globalisation and high technology, English is very necessary. These courses are effective. Officials who learn go back to their districts and can use their English with foreigners'* (Administrator 10). Another observed that some *'students with no previous experience in English can now attend meetings'* (Administrator 11).

Teachers, more able to analyse how and why that improvement had taken place, recognised that the relevance of the content of the courses led to higher motivation which in turn led to improved outcomes. This is articulated below by one who is both a teacher and a program administrator:

*We have been running an eight-month course for high-ranking Ministry officials since 1994. It was never very successful. Now we can achieve more in the same amount of time. The students are more motivated because of the text ... People learn more because they already have the background information ... Before we used "English for Lao Secondary Students". It's not appropriate. The*

*[LEFAP] modules are more related to their workplace. They have the topics and skills they need, for example, the names of ministries (Teacher/Administrator 12, Ministry EL unit).*

Half of the teachers, both provincial and those from ministries, saw the Lao content as contributing significantly to improved outcomes because it provided relevant language within existing frames of reference. In this respect, one teacher wryly observed, ‘*Students don’t need to know about the White House*’ (Teacher 14), a comment revealing a frustration with the commercial materials that was expressed by many. For example, another teacher explained:

*Before using this course, we used commercial texts, for example, ‘BBC English’, ‘Cambridge’, ‘Side By Side’. These weren’t suitable. When our students complete the course they want to be able to talk about Laos, not England. Students were anxious when they didn’t know about England [when they were studying]. This is a Lao government officials’ book. It has something that maybe students have known [already knew] about our country, our government. They know it in Lao but they have to know how to talk about it in English (Teacher 13).*

The Lao contextualisation of the materials was particularly appreciated for the linguistic knowledge it provided, not only to students, but also to their teachers. Despite their relevance to the Lao development process, words such as ‘sustainability’, for example, had not previously been part of a Lao English teacher’s vocabulary because of the commercial texts from which teachers had themselves learned English, and from which they had been accustomed to teaching. As expressed in the following comment by a counterpart, the new language was enthusiastically embraced:

*You know, before we’ve only taught general English such as ‘Interchange’. This gives us new language. This language is what we need for here. We are a developing country. We talk about these things in Lao. They don’t teach us to talk about them in English in ‘Interchange’. This is the context of our lives (Counterpart 3).*

The opportunities to learn while teaching added significantly to teachers’ appreciation of the course. Without being specifically asked during interviews, almost a third offered comments such as, ‘*I like teaching these courses because I learn English but also content. Actually I know it in Lao but I’ve never heard people use these words in English*’ (Teacher 11). Another, expanding on this experience of learning from the course content, revealed that this approach was not without its

difficulties, but that he expected it to become easier over time as his familiarity with the courses grew. He said,

*I think it's a new book and also a new subject for me to teach. I can learn ... improve my knowledge of English. I learn by doing. It's quite difficult for me to teach the first time but the next time it will be easier. I learn a lot from these books – especially Level 3. I learn new words, new phrases and the models of writing. That's very good. For example, writing a CV, writing faxes, writing a report; that's very helpful (Teacher 10).*

However, the learning was coming not only from the course books, but also from the students themselves as they introduced their own work-specific language into the classrooms. This was a confronting experience for teachers, because, whereas it is possible to learn course content beforehand (at least to some extent), new language articulated by students cannot be 'controlled'. Most disturbingly, from the teachers' point of view, it exposed their incomplete grasp of English. A situation in which a student knows – and articulates knowing – more than the teacher contradicts the expected roles of teachers and students. It was a situation anticipated with some trepidation during the project teacher training sessions. Now back in their classrooms, there was a distinct contrast between the responses to the situation of the more experienced and less experienced teachers. While the more experienced and secure teachers pragmatically accepted the situation and welcomed the challenge, the situation was causing the less experienced and less secure teachers much anxiety.

A striking pedagogical culture shift had occurred in the classrooms of the experienced and secure teachers. The classrooms had become places of cooperative learning, with teachers accepting that they could learn from their students. Their acceptance, however, did not render the situation pedagogically easy, as they struggled to provide as high a quality of learning as possible within the limits of their knowledge:

*It's quite hard sometimes. Like some information – like when we talk about 'bilateral' and 'multilateral', sometimes it's quite hard for us to see the system of organisation. We have to learn from the students because students know better than us. And sometimes the words they use, for example, technical words, we don't know. Sometimes we ask them, 'What does it mean?' to let other students understand, because teachers they don't know all the things and we explain to them [the students] about that (Teacher 8).*

The situation was intrinsically confronting, with teachers acknowledging the pedagogic limitations of their lack of knowledge. Among the more experienced

teachers there was a seemingly relaxed acceptance of the less defined and hierarchically delineated roles within the classroom, accompanied by pedagogic concern:

*At first we were worried that students knew more than us but, in fact, we have to learn. Nobody knows everything. We have to learn from each other, as we have done in class ... because it's impossible for us to research every word. There are many, many words. But sometimes I think that students make mistakes and we don't know exactly about the words – it's quite hard for teaching. But we have to learn from mistakes as well. If we don't know, we can tell them later (Teacher 7).*

In marked contrast, for less experienced and secure teachers lack of knowledge was a cause of much anxiety, and its impact felt both personally and pedagogically. Through the words of one of these teachers we hear a complicated mixture of appreciation and struggle. On the one hand, we hear his appreciation of the knowledge to be gained from teaching the government officials and, on the other hand, we hear of the struggle and uncertainty caused by his lack of content knowledge. Moreover, his story also discloses how his anxiety stemmed from his lack of experience as an employee at the teacher training college and from his lack of experience with the student group, the status of whom he was acutely aware:

*I was very excited [nervous] the first time I taught the government officials, because I had never taught them before. I used to teach students at secondary school. The level [of knowledge] of students at secondary schools is not the same as the level of government officials. Now I don't teach secondary school. I only teach government officials because the Head of HRD told me that I should be responsible for this course. Teaching students at secondary school is very easy because I follow the instructions in the book. Also the students don't ask me questions. But teaching government officials is very difficult because they ask me more about something what they need. Sometimes I can't solve their problem [answer their questions] right then. I tell them that this time I can't solve this problem. Maybe tomorrow I will find this answer and tell you later ... When I teach economic development, I'm not familiar with this field. Even in Lao I don't know enough about this ... Like 'New Economic Mechanism',<sup>24</sup> ... I'm confused about this. I don't know the difference between the eight priority areas and the New Economic Mechanism. And they ask me about*

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<sup>24</sup> 'New Economic Mechanism' 'Kon Kai Seth Tha Keat Mai' – similar to the Vietnamese notion of 'Doi Moi' – refers to the move towards a market economy within a socialist framework which has been Lao government policy since 1986. The eight priority areas were the Lao government's stated priorities for development which had been a topic included in the Level 3 course book.

*this. But I don't know how to solve this. I think they're the same but some students say they're not the same. But I think they're the same, aren't they? ... I'm happy to teach government officials [although] the first time it was difficult for me to teach but I enjoy it because I get more experience from them ... Many ideas came from the government officials ... Another thing that's very difficult for me is I never taught government official before – this is the first time for me. It's different from other teachers who teach at the TTC [teacher training college] because I used to teach only low level but this time high level. But also the government officials are like leadership. It's difficult for me to know how to pretend to be [know how to act] [laughs uneasily] (Teacher 3).*

The struggle expressed in the above story is underlaid by cultural values. Teacher 3's expectations of appropriate classroom behaviour were causing him to fear losing face by not being 'in control' of the whole learning process. It is noteworthy that so many others were pragmatically accepting the changed distribution of knowledge in their classrooms. Despite Teacher 3's anxieties, his words also demonstrated his determination to face the challenge. This determination was derived, to some extent, from the symbolic capital to be gained from being known as someone chosen to teach senior government officials. In addition, there were economic benefits to be gained for teachers in the provinces who were, at that time, being paid a salary supplement by the project. A counterpart summed up their position when she astutely commented that government officials '*will complain if they don't have good teachers. So teachers are motivated to improve because they're paid to teach these classes*' (Counterpart 1).

Through the counterpart's words it is clear that the maintenance of teachers' symbolic gain was contingent on the successful upgrading of knowledge, with inability to do so possibly resulting in the perception that the teacher was not, after all, capable of doing the job. Teacher 3's words '*I don't know how to solve this*' exemplify the difficulties teachers faced in upgrading their knowledge because of the chronic lack of access to information that characterises Lao socio-political life. As described in Chapter 4, at the beginning of the project the existing resources in the English Language Resource Centre in Vientiane, and the resource centres in the provincial teacher training colleges, were General English in focus and contained little to assist in a quest for the specific linguistic or development-related knowledge. These centres had been established with AusAID funding, and the project design rested on the false assumption that they were adequately resourced, operating well and



frequently accessed. Only passing reference was made in the design to the provincial Resource Centres needing further resourcing in terms of both learner resource materials and teacher resource materials (AusAID, 1999b:18). However, there were no outputs relating to this and scant time to attend to it. The resultant lack of access to information was underscored by a conversation about the Resource/Self Access Centre during which one teacher commented, *'It's really hard to find information. There's a lack of resources about world knowledge and about regional knowledge'*. Then he laughed and added, *'We suggest to our students to go to the Resource Centre but when they go there, there's nothing for them to read'* (Teacher 22). Without such resources, teachers are limited almost entirely to the course books and the students themselves as the avenues for gaining the necessary knowledge.

The difficulties confronting teachers in the execution of their roles and the maintenance of their status reveal the complexity of the 'acceptability' associated with the content of the courses. While the perceptions of administrators and teachers alike were that the relevance of the content led to improved outcomes, the relevance itself was offset by the linguistic, pedagogical and cultural challenges it posed for teachers with limited English, limited political knowledge, and limited access to resources with which to upgrade their knowledge.

### **The competency-based approach**

Like the Lao content, the competency-based approach was widely attributed with contributing to improved outcomes and was, therefore, a significant factor in perceptions of acceptability. Also like the Lao content, its adoption was problematic, with difficulties embedded in political and cultural perceptions of need and appropriateness.

At the national level, i.e. the policy level, since 1997 the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been responsible for promoting the establishment of foreign languages programs, particularly English, for government officials. The Lao government has perceived this to be important to the socio-economic development of the country (see Chapter 2). For the national coordinator of the English for Government Officials program, the key to the acceptability of the competency-based curriculum and its accompanying materials was the standardisation of outcomes:

*Two years ago we organised a seminar to motivate different provinces to organise the English training course for their officials and then in the seminar we have produced our program. We have*

*introduced to them our project to let them know our project. And then we try to convince them that if we use this program maybe in the near future we have the continuation from Level 1 to Level 3, Level 4. Because so far we have too many programs. Each province they had their own program. Maybe they had their own text book so it's quite difficult to evaluate the quality. Maybe some provinces, they say "I have already organised the advanced level, the intermediate level" but what is that exactly? So if we use the same program, the same materials, then we can monitor so we can ensure the quality. So that's why we try to convince them to use the same materials. Of course, they can adapt some pages if they need but the core curriculum needs to be the same (Administrator 2).*

Likewise, teachers appreciated the standardisation because the organisation of class groups around levels of language competency led to improved teaching and learning conditions. Under the previous system of selection by an administrator, class groupings were disparate in language levels. The new system resulted in unprecedented homogeneity within the classroom, and so teachers were finding it easier to cater for the students' learning needs. In this next extract, a teacher is reflecting on this 'before' and 'after' effect:

*If the levels are not the same, it's difficult for teachers and for students also ... In my opinion the competency-based teaching is very effective for government officials if we do assessment for them and also if we respect these rules. I think it's easy for teachers and also for students who study together in the class. I think it's very appropriate and also effective (Teacher 3).*

There had been previous attempts to introduce assessment systems – such as the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (Ingram & Wylie, 1984) – which would result in more homogenous classes, but these had not been successful. The difference between the competency-based system (in the systemic-linguistic model the project team adopted – see Chapter 4) and other assessment systems is the explicit nature of the criteria for competency (see Appendix 4b). These criteria were playing a significant role in teachers' perceptions of acceptability. Not only did they lead to improved teaching and learning conditions, but, as described in a journal entry (page 91), the criteria gave teachers, for the first time, an understanding of language learning needs and how to cater for them. In addition, the project team had made explicit links in the materials between the development of language skills and the competencies, so that teachers could see how an activity in the course book contributed to the development of competency (see Appendix 4c). Consequently, for the first time teachers had access to a comprehensive curriculum which, through the

criteria for competency, gave them an accessible guide to language teaching, learning and assessment. A counterpart reasoned that the *'criteria is easy to follow; teachers know what they have to do'* (Counterpart 1), and a teacher commented that *'in my opinion I think that with the competency-based approach, we can know exactly the ability of the students'* (Teacher 8). It was this 'knowing the ability of the students' that contrasted so markedly with their previous grammar approach to assessment, which, as another teacher remarked, gives *'scores [that] don't give information'* (Teacher 15). In contrast, the *'criteria are useful. They show us step by step how to build language skills from simple to high level'* (Teacher 12).

As well as teachers, there were suggestions that the direct beneficiaries, the government officials, appreciated knowing, through the criteria, how to approach and plan their learning. Observations in support of this include a teacher's comment that *'Learners appreciate the approach. They know where to focus'* (Teacher 1), and a counterpart's report that a student had told her that it did not matter that she (the student) had not 'passed' all the competencies because the criteria showed her what she needed to focus on in order to improve. In agreement with this, one administrator, who had studied in the previous (non-competency-based program), said, *'I agree with the competency based approach. It's useful because the criteria help people to understand what and how to learn more'* (Administrator 7). In the opinion of another administrator, *'This way of assessing is very useful to see which competencies they cannot pass, and then they have to study again'* (Administrator 9). A third administrator saw the criteria for competency as a useful guide to workplace task allocation once students had graduated and were back in their offices because *'When staff finish their courses they report what competencies they have achieved. I must plan what they will do to use their knowledge'* (Administrator 4). However, despite this apparently widespread appreciation of the competency-based approach, the reality was that, for political and cultural reasons, administrators and teachers were having difficulties in its application at both initial entry-level and as students progressed through the levels.

Difficulties at initial entry-level to the program were described in detail by one of the teachers. His words displayed conflicting emotions of frustration with the hierarchy and – with the repetition of the word 'respect' – deference to it. His story spoke of a tension between pedagogical ideals and cultural expectations:

*Mr. X, Mr. Y and the Head of the Standing Committee and the Head of HRD are the coordinators of this project. They select the government officials for this course. After we do the assessments, we send the names to them but they add more names – people who haven't done the assessment ... The first and second time they sent all of them – we didn't choose. The third time we had a selection but they still sent extra people. Some people cannot pass but they sent them [to class] anyway because these people are very important they said. ... Even though we do assessment we should also respect the head of HRD. [This time] the HRD sent us 25 students. We chose 16 students but we have now in class another three or four who are not appropriate. They should not study in this course but we must respect the head of HRD. They say to us that this person is very important for them. For this reason we should respect them. But according to the rules we cannot accept them (Teacher 3) (emphasis added).*

In accord with Teacher 3's notion of 'respect', he was obligated to accept the students. He appears to have no insights into the actions of his superiors; he only knows that he must respect their decisions. On questioning, these superiors also offer no further insights. One merely gives a small smile and shifts his gaze. Another, echoing what Teacher 3 has already said, replies that, *'We know the levels are not the same but we have to let them study because they are very important. We know they don't pass but we have to let them study or they wouldn't have a chance because there are many projects being implemented in this area'* (Administrator 6). He then added something the relevance of which, at the time, was unclear to me. He said, *'We have 12 districts in this province but some are in the rural area. Only four are in the lowlands'* (Administrator 6).

The significance of Administrator 6's words only became clear on a visit to another province where a teacher acted as spokesperson for his colleagues to express concerns about the situation they were encountering as small numbers of officials from remote districts began to appear in their classes:

*The first time we ran this course all the students came from town where they have the opportunity to learn. At that time their level was very good. The second time we extended to the districts but not the very far districts – the districts near town – and then we noticed a difference but it was a small difference in levels. The last group has been very hard for us. Because some of them come from the remote districts and they don't know the English alphabet. We try to help them but it's very difficult to succeed. There are only two or three so maybe we can help them. The others are OK' (Teacher 5).*

As in Teacher 3's class, the number of students without the required competency was small. However, unlike Teacher 3, whom we had already heard was new to his position and still insecure in it, the experienced teachers in this second province had established open channels of communication with their administrators. This had enabled them to understand why the situation was occurring and to work with administrators towards a solution:

*We have discussed this with the administrators. We would like the rural areas to run courses for people who don't know any English. After that they can continue here. We would like the Governor of the province to organize the learning of English in the districts. If they can organize that I think that then we won't have any more worries about their levels. But now the students who come from far away like the remote districts on the border of Vietnam – it's very hard for them to learn English so I want them to know the basics first. For example they should know their A B C and 'Good morning, how are you?', something like that (Teacher 5).*

A later discussion with a college administrator confirmed this.

*The Governor's Office wants us to take students from the district level and this is a big problem. We are working on a solution now. If the 15 districts send local teachers to the TTC we can help them to prepare – we can train them and then send them back to their districts. Then they can teach a pre-course for two or three months before the district officials come to the TTC to start level 1. They need to study first in their own district because otherwise they would be away from their work for too long (Administrator 7).*

The HRD administrator of this province, while agreeing that a 'pre-course' would minimise the pedagogic difficulties, was worried about the cost. He commented that *'Teaching and learning will be of a good quality if we can have a course at district level but we need financial assistance to do this. We really need the LEFAP project to be extended'* (Administrator 8). The need to extend the provision to district-level officials was echoed in the other provinces, and clarifies the meaning of Administrator 6's earlier comments about rural and urban districts. Like the province above, others also considered it necessary to extend the LEFAP-developed curriculum pathway in order to meet the needs of officials who, because of their remote locations, had not had previous access to English.

As well as these emerging problems at initial-entry level, there were also difficulties with applying the assessment criteria at each of the three levels of the curriculum pathway. As with initial-entry, these difficulties stemmed from cultural

and political considerations. The situation was first made clear to me during what I had intended as a classroom observation, as recorded in a journal entry:

*JOURNAL ENTRY: Class observation*

*Before observing the Level 3 class, the teacher (as always) asked me to say a few words to the students. I told them I was very pleased to be there and was interested in knowing what they thought of their courses. The teacher left the room – perhaps he had forgotten something. At that point a student told me that the class was difficult because not everybody passed all the Level 2 competencies. ‘They don’t have the background’, he said. I asked for suggestions or solutions but nobody answered. I suggested to them that they could influence how things were done – perhaps they could talk to the committee (they were, after all, senior level officials). But they just looked back at me blankly. It occurred to me that they had raised it with me because they thought I could have an effect but the project was nearly finished and I was no longer an advisor. Someone changed the subject and asked me about learning strategies. The teacher never returned to the classroom and we spent the rest of the lesson discussing strategies. (February 2002)*

This was the second student in a Level 3 class to raise this issue with me. The first time had been in a different province while I was still working on the LEFAP project (see Chapter 4, page 92). On both occasions the students had waited until their teacher was not in the room. I presume this to be because they did not want to cause the teacher loss of face. One teacher’s comments however, indicated that he was concerned about students losing face. In his view, ‘*they don’t want to return [to their workplaces] if they don’t finish this course. They want to continue to study. If they return to their office maybe they will be shy [embarrassed]*’ (Teacher 3). In agreement, a counterpart considered that:

*Students will be embarrassed when they come back to the office if they’re not successful in learning. When I was in [province X], students said to me, ‘What do I say when I go back to my office and the boss says, “Were you successful?” We explain to them before the course, “Don’t be shy if you cannot pass”, but they feel embarrassed when they couldn’t pass. They don’t think about whether their level suits the course or not (Counterpart 2).*

I also presumed, as indicated in the above journal entry, that students thought I would be able to do something about it. I worried that perhaps there was more I could have done during the project. Teacher 5, who had so clearly expressed the political pressure to admit district-level officials, was again eloquent in explaining the cultural difficulties surrounding assessments. He was also concerned about students

articulating through the levels without the appropriate competency level. His concerns, however, centred on Level 3 of the course – the level of the students who had raised the issue. Teacher 5 suggested that difficulties in adopting the competency-based approach would be diminished, if, rather than only local teachers conducting the assessments, they were supervised by officials (i.e. counterparts) from the Ministry of Education. The presence of Ministry officials would ‘add muscle’ because their positions invested them, in Teacher 5’s perception, with the authority and status to enforce the competency standards:

*For the last level of the course, talking here about the rules, we would like a committee from Vientiane to work with us. Maybe one of the [counterparts]. They can do it strictly – say for each competency if they can or cannot pass because we’re talking about a certificate here. It’s a very important one. If they get a certificate but their knowledge is not appropriate for a certificate, well ... [laughs]. Who passes, passes. Who cannot pass should not pass. We don’t blame ourselves for what is happening but it should be like that I think (Teacher 5).*

The word ‘strict’ was used frequently in explanations of why students were placed in classes when they did not have the appropriate competency level. However, it was not only teachers who were diffident about taking on the responsibility. On discussing it later with a counterpart, he also feared being seen as ‘too strict’ and taking the blame for poor assessment outcomes. He told me:

*I think it’s a counterpart job to do but we don’t want to have to do that as our job. We want to leave it for the teachers. The teachers should think about who’s going to attend their course. It’s easier for them to teach if they get the right level for the class. But why don’t they do that? They say, ‘I can’t do that because he’s my superior’ ... But for us too, if we do that the students will think that we are too strict with them. ... If they cannot pass their exam they would say “Oh, because of the counterparts’ decision”; not because of the teachers’ decision ... Nobody wants to do this job. It’s too difficult to explain and too difficult to implement (Counterpart 2).*

The words of these stakeholders evoke a vivid picture of their discomfort as they try to reconcile contradictions between their perceptions of the benefits of the competency-based approach and their cultural values. On the one hand, their words attest to their appreciation of the pedagogical benefits of a ‘strict’ application of the approach (cf. also pages 124-125). On the other hand, that same strictness sits uncomfortably with the flexibility we have seen applied to other aspects of Lao life (cf. pages 12, 14-15, 33). Here, we see the lack of flexibility in the assessment causing

anxiety because of a deeply held respect for the interdependent social hierarchy and the preservation of harmony within it – the preservation of which their own place in the hierarchy is also dependent.

## **Commitment: Plans and concerns**

Despite the difficulties, the perceived success of the program in contributing to government policy through its standardised and improved outcomes generated a commitment to the continuation of the program and to the support role of the English Language Resource Centre (ELRC). For national and local administrators these plans included not only extending the provision to the district level but also to other provinces. However, plans were fraught with concerns about the number of teachers trained and, most pressingly, the need to fund the program. These concerns were articulated across all stakeholder groups but prompted distinctive responses between the groups depending on the group role within the project field.

### **National level commitment**

The Ministry of Education, as described in Chapter 3, was responsible for implementing the program for upgrading the language skills of government officials. In contrast to the LEFAP project design in which, as outlined in Chapter 4, the primary focus was on the English language provision in the capital city, the national coordinator's words attest to a primary concern for establishing programs in the provinces. In voicing the efforts of the Ministry to assist provinces with their program implementation plans, the national coordinator revealed the enormity of the task facing administrators who previously had not been responsible for funding and managing programs. His words revealed that, in his view, the LEFAP project with its focus on just five provinces acted as a pilot program which, having demonstrated successful outcomes was now being extended nationally. At the same time, his words demonstrated an acute awareness of the funding constraints to this ambitious undertaking and of the small number of teachers trained to teach the challenging courses:

*The Ministry of Education has been organising a seminar a year for the last couple of years. In the first seminar we organised in Savannakhet, only four or five provinces had their own budgets organised for English language training for government officials. After that first year, many provinces began to understand our project. So that last year [at the seminar] in Champasak, the number of programs had increased. We had been able to help them*



*you see. At first they didn't know how to raise the budget but after we explained to them things were clarified. Previously there was some misunderstanding but now there is no problem ... The problem now is that even if the province has organised its budget, we are worried about the quality of teachers – we have a lot of concern ... Anyway, we try to do it like this, to make our project sustainable. I think first of all we need to convince them to formulate the Human Resource Development plan for their own province and then each province needs to establish a committee responsible for the training course. And the committee is assigned to raise the budget. Once they have a budget they can cooperate with our teacher training colleges to run the training course for them because, under LEFAP, we have already trained the trainers. This kind of thing, we need to strengthen. Many provinces, now they would like to get our program, to get our materials and then they can find a way to get the budget from the government. We can share our ideas because they need the budget to do it. They need to pay the teachers. Sometimes they need to pay for the equipment, all the materials. That's why they need to raise the budget. And then we share our experience about, for example, who will raise the budget and how to get the budget from the local authorities. That's why this year I think most of the provinces can get the budget from the government for organising the training course. You see, from the seminars we have a good result (Administrator 2). (Emphasis added)*

The national coordinator's concern over the provincial inexperience in raising budgets is very apparent, but so too is his sense of pride and ownership (which can be clearly heard in his repetition of the words 'our program') at having successfully fulfilled his political responsibilities and promoted the spread of the provision of English classes for government officials. This was achieved primarily through the organisation of an annual seminar which enabled the culturally important notion of 'sharing' to take place. The coordinator's emphasis on being able to 'share our ideas' and 'share our experience' contrasts with the lack of meetings for administrators in the project design.

### **Local level commitment**

The results of these seminars, at least in the five provinces involved in the LEFAP (pilot) project were revealed in the words of provincial administrators who, like the national coordinator, voiced a commitment to continuing the program. However, unlike the optimism at national level that the seminars had assisted the provinces to organise their budgets, the local administrators were concerned about their ability to find sufficient funds to fulfill their post-project responsibilities. Their

hopes were pinned, in the main, on finding another project to assist them. This commitment, concern and the hopes for assistance were expressed by administrators in all provinces and recounted below through the voices of two from the same province:

*After the project, the province will try to continue. There are still many who haven't attended and we also need more for those who have attended. We will propose to the Governor that we have a budget for paying teachers, for stationery and teacher training. The HRD already has a small budget for this. The HRD budget has previously been used for other fields, not English. Perhaps there will be another project to support the delivery of this program. Or maybe some other organisations will help us (Administrator 4).*

The second administrator expanded on how 'other organisations' could help to sustain their existing provincial program:

*In case the province cannot find the budget, the teacher training college will try to find another way to continue. For example, maybe we can take staff from a private organisation or another project and they can pay. Then we could have funds to pay for the classes of our own provincial officials. We're very keen for this course to continue. It's very important (Administrator 3).*

The teacher training colleges were already generating income by conducting English classes in the afternoons and evenings for fee-paying students, and teachers had considerable workloads. Now administrators were proposing to, if possible, extend this type of service, using the LEFAP curriculum and teachers, to adults working in non-government, but development-oriented, fields. For the administrators, teachers' workloads did not seem to be a consideration, their concerns centering on perceptions of the attrition of the already small number of teachers trained to teach on the program, as observed in comments such as, '*There needs to be more training because trained teachers leave and there are not enough teachers left to take over*' (Administrator 12). Another administrator, revealing AusAID to be instrumental in some of the 'leaving', explained that '*Teachers move to work in another place. We get new teachers in and then they leave. For example, Achan Sivilay attended all the training at the ELRC but now she has gone to Australia on an AusAID scholarship*' (Administrator 11). Except for the complicity of donor agencies, it was unclear from administrators' comments why teachers leave the program or what might influence their commitment to teaching on it. It was clear, however, that administrators feared the potential loss of the already limited number of teachers, and the destabilising effect this would have on the program. This was a concern for the administrators

because, as their plans demonstrated, they were committed to the continuation of the program, although unsure of their ability to generate the funds for an undertaking that had not previously been a provincial responsibility.

### **Teacher commitment**

Despite the fears of administrators, teachers' comments indicated a commitment to the program. Their commitment, however, involved conflict between what Hofstede (1998 p.32) refers to as the 'ideologically desirable' and 'pragmatic desires'. In the Vientiane-based ministries, teaching the government officials was the official employment of the teachers involved, and consequently their government salary would continue after the LEFAP project. Ministry teachers were confident the programs would continue and they would continue to teach on them. In contrast, payment for teaching these classes in the provinces was a supplement to the meager government salary, and was currently being paid from the LEFAP budget but would soon be taken over by the provincial HRD. As a result, teacher responses to the uncertainty of their future were complex. A few, drawing perhaps on past experience, believed that when the LEFAP project stopped, the programs would close, at least temporarily, while the administration 'looked for a budget'. More commonly, however, teachers believed the programs would continue but on a greatly reduced budget and they would be required to teach for a lower level of pay. Although teachers themselves raised the issue of their payments, many, like the following teacher, did so with diffidence:

*I know, for example, my Governor here maybe cannot provide something for the students or for teachers. As you know, we work a lot everyday ... [his voice becomes hesitant and he seems to search for words] ... give us a low per diem, for example. Normally we get 10,000 kip [approximately US\$1] for one hour. Without the project maybe we'll only get 4 or 5,000 per hour and then how can we do? We can do but ... it's difficult. I think that without a project, maybe, how can I say, nearly to die [embarrassed laugh]. Sorry this is not suitable to say but we work a lot [more laughter]. We know it's our duty. That's OK. After that we need free time to earn enough for our living conditions [more embarrassed laughter]. Sorry if something that I say is not appropriate (Teacher 5).*

Others were less reticent and told of the detrimental effect a lowering of payment would have on the quality of the program:

*If we teach government officials but we get a lower daily pay, we cannot pay for daily life – so teachers will be lazy. Maybe they*

*[teachers] will want to teach in another place – in another course. So even though they will teach, they won't pay enough attention to the course. Like right now there's the Special Course. Maybe they will be responsible for teaching that course – or in many places. They'll keep teaching here according to the HRD. We all respect them [the HRD officials] but they won't pay attention enough to their teaching (Teacher 3).*

Through the words of these teachers we hear of the conflict between idealism and pragmatism, with the first teacher's embarrassment stemming from the gap between his socialist ideals and the reality of his life. Both teachers would feel obligated to continue working on the program because, as Teacher 5 said, '*It's our duty*'. However, the reality of needing to provide for their families would inevitably lead to a lowering of the quality of the program as they put their energies into some other private teaching that would provide enough income. A teacher-coordinator further explained how the reduced pay would impact on the day-to-day operation of the program:

*... as coordinator, it would be hard to talk to people about doing the work. For example, today Achan Somphou came and I said "Can you please go and teach my class?" So if there wasn't money for it, why would he even come here, never mind why would he go and teach the class? He would say, "Oh, I have to go somewhere else" or "I'm busy" (Teacher 7).*

At the same time, teachers in all venues expressed a desire to continue to improve the program. Many recounted the difficulties of providing a quality program with the limited number of teachers trained by the project and, as a consequence, the need for more training to be conducted. This was articulated in both Vientiane and in the provinces. In many places, those without training relied heavily on their more skilled colleagues, who, as a teacher from one of the Vientiane-based ministries described, were often unsure of how to help them:

*We have not enough instructors. Just only four teachers who can teach these books but we have five classes ... Sometimes we can share together the way how to teach. We have meetings to talk together about teaching the Lao government officials' books – it's not easy. Sometimes we decide that a teacher can teach maybe the first five units – we are sure they can teach up to there. After that – the next five units – another teacher may be stronger. Only Achan Khetkeo and I have had training. It's hard for us. It would be easy if every teacher could teach each unit. Sometimes we don't know how to do when the weak instructors start on the lesson ... They say maybe they need to attend training about these books (Teacher 13).*

One of the provinces had attempted to solve the problem by organising a short training session for all the English language teachers at the teachers college, not just those currently assigned to the Government Officials program:

*Sometimes we can help our teachers – we can train them ... We did a one-week workshop for Level 2 for all English teachers here. We introduced the book ... We took a writing task, how to do a group writing task, how to teach dialogue, reading ... We introduced the book and the curriculum ... the organisation of the units ... and then we talked about assessment ... They said, 'Ooh, different assessment' (Teacher 7 and Teacher 8).*

While this initiative and commitment is commendable, teachers considered this shorter training in their own venue to be inadequate:

*I teach Level 1 but I didn't attend any workshop training in Vientiane. I had a one-week workshop training here. It was difficult for me at first because I didn't know about the course book – how to teach some lessons. I asked other teachers for help. It's easier now because it's the second time for me to teach this level and I know the course book (Teacher 16).*

However, the paucity of the LEFAP training was also impacting in other ways. In some venues, both provincial and Vientiane-based, teachers were struggling to teach at a higher level than the training they had attended. In most, however, in order to maintain quality, the decision had been made that Level 3 was too difficult for teachers who had not had the specific training to teach it. As a result, there were staffing problems if a teacher was sick or otherwise absent as the following comment shows:

*Our teachers need training for Level 3 because when the teacher is absent we can't teach instead of him. Because we didn't train for Level 3, we don't know how to teach it. Level 3 is more difficult. The language is difficult but also teaching some of the things is very difficult for me. There are things I don't know. I need to train for Level 3. Level 2 I can teach even though I didn't train. But Level 3 I can't. If possible, I need the project to continue to support us (Teacher 6).*

As described in Chapter 4, the project team had found a total of only 25 teachers (in the network of provinces and Vientiane-based ministries) with high enough language skills to teach the Level 3 course. The extensive language upgrading required for other teachers to teach that level was out of the question given the project time frame. The resulting staffing problem was now all too apparent.

## The ELRC support role

The need for further training was also apparent to counterparts at the English Language Resource Centre. One observed:

*In all places that use our materials they require more training ... Because we provide teacher training workshops to teachers for different levels but in fact when they implement the materials, people have to teach all levels. They can't focus on the level they were trained for because of the lack of teachers ... After the project, we should think of opportunities to upgrade these teachers who have been trained under the project ... There are not enough skilled teachers – especially for Level 3. Many teachers are not skilled enough (Counterpart 1).*

As a result of not only these staffing difficulties, but also the challenging content and assessment practices stakeholders spoke of earlier, teachers in all locations were anxious for the support role of the English Language Resource Centre (ELRC) to continue. The comments of many are echoed in the words of a teacher who said, ‘*We need the academic support of the Resource Centre in Vientiane. We need them to continue monitoring and visiting students ... If it could continue the way it is, that would be good*’ (Teacher 7).

Counterparts were also keen to continue their support work and were aware of the necessity of doing so. They envisaged an on-going multifaceted support role for themselves:

*Our role [should be] to collect information and maintain the database, provide teaching materials – course books, supplementary materials and assessment tasks – and assist in running courses. We can provide professional advice to teachers, students and administrators. We can assist by observing classes and help them implement the materials. We plan to visit them and talk about their classes (Counterpart 1).*

The role this counterpart describes is a continuation of the work done during the LEFAP project. It was time consuming and expensive work involving much travel. If the national coordinator’s plans for expanding the provision to all provinces were to come to fruition, the ELRC’s work would also expand. It is an ideal that would be difficult to realise given the staffing and funding shortages within the Ministry of Education.

As an indication of the Lao government’s commitment to the English for Government Officials program and the importance with which it was regarded, the Ministry of Education was considering the radical step of introducing fee-for service

activities into the ELRC in order to generate the necessary funds to support the program. These plans were still at a rudimentary stage, and as the national coordinator outlined the possibilities, he also articulated the enormity of effort required for embarking on a task within a ministry lacking skilled personnel and within a system lacking commercial experience. Confronted with these, the national coordinator, like the provincial administrators, reverted more than once to the familiarity and safety of hoping for donor assistance:

*We're working on plans for sustainability now. It's a long process. The plans are for promoting the new role of the ELRC. First the plans were considered within our Department [the Teacher Training Department]. We then received comments from all the departments. Then they went to the Minister. There are many documents for consideration. This takes a long time and we don't have enough staff for the job of developing regulations ... If plans for commercial activities are approved by the Minister then we have no problems. The plans are with the Minister now. We have asked for permission from the Minister to allow the ELRC to conduct Levels 1, 2 and 3. But can ministry officials pay? Maybe we'll be able to get money from some organisation to assist with this ... (Administrator 2).*

The national coordinator's reference to ministry officials is noteworthy in that this was his only reference, throughout our interview, to centrally-located officials. His attention was on the provinces, with Vientiane-based officials being the hoped-for source of funds to support the provincial program. He went on to explain how, although provinces would also need to pay for some services, the generation of income by the ELRC was a necessity for other support activities:

*We have to help the provinces. Some provinces ask us to send trainers to help them even though they're not included in this project, for example Borikhamsay Province. When we help them, it's encouragement for them. It's justification for them to raise their budget. After this project, or even now in the last few months, counterparts will be available but the provinces will need to pay. For example if Borikhamsay asks for training, it will be considered case by case depending on the availability of the trainers. But really we need the assistance from donors, for example, to organise a central training course. It will be very difficult to organise central training. It's hard to get the budget from the government for this. We can usually have two to three workshops a year – in total, not just for government officials' courses. After the project we are thinking about how to get money, for example, maybe we can make use of the internet facilities at the ELRC. Another problem is we have no experience with costing. And maybe high authorities will say it's too early (Administrator 2).*

His concluding remarks emphasise the difficulties in implementing such plans because of inexperience as well as ideological reasons. A counterpart, anticipating that decision-making for the income generation would remain centralised within the ministry rather than devolving to the ELRC itself, expressed frustration with the potentially unproductive slowness of the yet-to-be finalised system for approval of these activities. The remarks are very candid for a Lao government official, and the repeated phrase *'It's not a secret'* suggests the counterpart was offering a justification for being so openly critical of the system:

*If the MOE has the policy that [the ELRC] is able to find the budget by ourselves it would be easy for us. We can go to any project or organisation because they have the budgets. But it's not clear yet whether we can do that ... but each time we would have to get permission - each time. It's not a secret. This is the way we're investigating now ... The systems are not there yet. If they say you can find the funds by yourself, then after you have the funds you can apply for permission, we will be happy ... [But] we're waiting for them to make up their minds. It's not a secret. Right now we're doing that (Counterpart 2). [Original emphasis.]*

Despite such frustrations, counterparts were excited by the possibility of this new role and had ideas for realising the goal. They were also well aware of the need to generate income. In our discussion, Counterpart 1 exclaimed, *'They can buy our materials, course books, teachers books, supplementary materials! But after the project, we'll have to cover recurrent costs. If not the centre will collapse!'* Another counterpart added that *'If we conduct the course, we have to be competitive with other centres in Vientiane. If it is commercial, we need to make sure that we have good competence – high quality teachers'* (Counterpart 5).

Counterparts were confident that they could be competitive because they would be able to draw from amongst themselves and from the best of those they had trained – as long as the classes paid adequately. Like the national coordinator, however, they were not confident of costing and marketing their programs. Their inexperience showed in their responses during a group discussion of marketing which included such grandiose advertising strategies as television advertisements, but no one thought of sending a letter or leaflet outlining the support services they could offer to ministry training units, provincial Human Resources Departments and other development assistance projects.

Such responses emphasise the disjunction between reality and the project design, which had designated the generation of income as being the sole responsibility



of the Lao counterpart agencies (see Table 5, page 101). This was done with no consideration given to Lao skilled staffing shortages, and no provision made during the life of the project for assisting the Lao government to develop the strategies to generate the necessary income. The absence of such assistance had the potential to undermine the longer-term acceptability of the program and Lao stakeholder commitment to it.

## Disjunctions

The Lao responses in this chapter have shown that, towards the end of the LEFAP project, stakeholders were committed to the continuation of the English for Government Officials program. This commitment was demonstrated by the national coordinator's efforts to extend the program beyond the five focal provinces, and in his plans for the introduction of income-generating activities at the ELRC in order to support the program nationally. Commitment was also demonstrated at local level by the plans of provincial administrators to fund and staff the program once LEFAP funding ceased. The commitment of stakeholders stemmed from widespread perceptions that the curriculum and materials led to improved learning outcomes and, therefore, provided a tool with which to achieve the Lao government's 1996 policy of upgrading the foreign language skills of its government officials. In this regard, one stakeholder observed, *'the biggest success is the materials and the whole policy we've been involved in the area of government official training. We've contributed to the successful implementation of the policy'* (Counterpart 2).

Although the curriculum and materials met with widespread approval and were generally regarded as acceptable, neither of these educational changes were unproblematic. In all stakeholder groups, the criteria for competency were perceived as being beneficial because of the clarity they brought to the teaching and learning process and, for some administrators, to the allocation of post-course workplace responsibilities. At the same time, many stakeholders were experiencing difficulties in actually *using* those criteria for placement and assessment purposes because of the cultural difficulties it caused for those who had to implement a process which was perceived as resulting in a possible loss of face. Thus, the 'strictness' of the approach was proving very difficult for teachers whose paramount concern was for group harmony rather than transparency and accountability.

The issue of the criteria for competency was further complicated by the perceived need to extend the provision to district-level officials. Few of these had had previous access to English classes and, as a consequence, administrators were responding to political pressures by accepting officials who did not meet course entry standards. Although the reason for the inclusion of these officials was not stated explicitly and requires further investigation, the Prime Ministerial Advisory Note on Decentralisation (cf. Appendix1) issued during the project implementation phase was, I considered, a possible motivation. Whatever the reason, from the Lao point of view, even before the LEFAP project had finished the three-level curriculum pathway was inadequate, even though it was far more extensive than the pathway the project design had considered adequate.

The issues surrounding the acceptability of the materials were similarly complex. Their acceptability stemmed from their contextualisation within the lives of Lao officials and the consequent relevance of the language, which could not be found in commercial materials, but which was perceived as contributing to the improved outcomes. However, at the same time as teachers welcomed the introduction of this language and the chance to broaden their own knowledge, the linguistic skills and general knowledge required of teachers to teach these courses challenged cultural expectations of their roles in the classroom. As a result, teachers in all locations expressed a desire for further training in order to meet their students' needs and to feel culturally comfortable in their classrooms. Moreover, the maintenance of the teachers' symbolic and economic gains were contingent on their continuing to upgrade their language. However, with no project outputs relating to increasing resources other than the core course materials, and project timelines constraining attempts to upgrade the resources in the Resource Centres/ Self Access Centres, teachers had little access to alternative relevant print or electronic resources and, therefore, limited possibilities for reducing their cultural, pedagogic and economic anxieties. Thus, it was evident that the brevity of project timelines combined with the donor insistence on extensive training for Vientiane-based teachers rather than provincial teachers had resulted in insufficient training and inadequate resources. It was a situation which, as project funding drew to a close, had the potential to undermine the acceptability of the program and, consequently, administrators' commitment to its on-going funding.

Other issues also threatened to undermine the program. Administrators voiced fears of future teacher attrition and the effect this would have on the program. At the

same time, teachers told of their difficulties in supporting those who worked on the program but had received little or no training. Thus, the inadequacy of the numbers trained was already affecting the program, even though to date there had been little movement of staff. In addition, although provincial administrators were expressing a commitment to funding, it was accompanied by concerns about their ability to *raise* the necessary finances. This leads to the issue of the provision of support for administrators. Over a decade ago, Verspoor (1989; 1993) found management capacity to be of prime importance for the institutionalisation of educational change projects. More recently, the Asian Development Bank's Lao education sector report (ADB, 2000:174) advised that opportunities for sharing amongst administrators was a condition for the sustainability of successful educational change at the local level, and the words of the national coordinator, quoted previously (page 133), confirm the sharing of experiences to be a culturally appropriate way to solve common problems. Under such circumstances, AusAID's failure to include in its project design opportunities for such sharing amongst administrators is highly questionable.

AusAID's actions regarding income generation are also questionable. Two years before the start of the LEFAP project, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs had commented on the Lao bureaucracy's inexperience in a market economy (DFAT, 1997), and in the same year as the project began, AusAID had noted that the provision of recurrent funding was frequently a difficulty for the Lao government (AusAID, 1999a:11). On this issue, the ADB Lao education sector report advised that projects should include training in self-sustainability to assist in the post-project provision of recurrent funding (ADB, 2000:209). Despite the Australian government's own acknowledgement of this socio-political reality, such support was not included in the LEFAP project design. Despite the advice in the comprehensive ADB report, when assistance in developing the ELRC's income generating capacities was requested by the Ministry of Education, it was denied. AusAID's refusal to assist, even when specifically requested to do so, raises questions about AusAID's own commitment to the sustainability of its project initiatives and reveals a disjunction between donor rhetoric and reality.

The Lao responses to the curriculum model have elaborated on the disjunctions between design and reality observed during the project implementation phase. The Lao responses have demonstrated that, despite the efforts of the implementing team to overcome these disjunctions (Chapter 4), they continue to

reverberate as project funding was drawing to a close. Moreover, the responses demonstrate how these reverberations have the potential to affect the sustainability of the English language program initiated by the project. This suggests that the risk assessment included in the project design document should have cited four not three risks: that as well as the Australian side being responsible for ensuring the acceptability of the educational changes, there needed to be an acknowledgement that the *design itself* may be a potential risk. It further suggests that the strategy for mitigating such a risk would be more flexibility on the part of the donor in order to deal with 'the real world situations found in institutions, that may not have been apparent from the brief visits made by aid personnel at the initial planning stages' (Sharp, 1998).

As AusAID prepared to withdraw its support for the program, wiping its hands of further responsibility, the Lao responses to the curriculum model and the project design have revealed the shaky foundations on which the Lao were expected to fulfill their responsibility for sustaining the program. The resulting pragmatic, political and cultural challenges facing Lao stakeholders signaled the need for the second stage of my research to focus on if, and how, the disjunctions between the design of the project and the socio-political and cultural reality had been resolved.

## Chapter 7: Change

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### *A snapshot of change*

*I stay in a flat two blocks from the centre of Vientiane. Behind me is one of the poorer districts. Every evening I see an Indian man bringing his cow home from whatever patch of grass he has tethered it that day. There was a time, not so long ago, when the cow didn't have to be tethered. It would have wandered, along with goats and chickens, through the school yards and along the dusty pot-holed roads. Maybe finding itself a shady spot under a flame tree or a warm spot to slumber on the road. There was not much to disturb it – mostly bicycles, some motorbikes and the odd project-owned car.*

*Now, in front of my flat is one of the major roads streaming with traffic. I'm shocked by the traffic, by the change in only eighteen months. Since I left, all the major roads and drainage systems have been completed. Many of the shady trees have been sacrificed to road widening. To progress. Now there's an endless flow of four wheel drives, utes, motorbikes and noisy, exhaust-belching tuk tuk's imported from Thailand. Nobody walks or rides bicycles any more except the very poor and foreigners like myself. Here in the capital the changes are stark – the traffic, the shops, the restaurants, the internet cafes. But an Australian colleague insists nothing has changed, really changed, he says, underneath.*

*I am given a desk in the Ministry of Education. Here in the Department of Teacher Training I see people busily organising their day. Carting boxes of training materials in or out of the office, working at their computers, getting on with their work. I think about the change from when I first worked in Laos. In 1990, if you walked into an office, as likely as not, nothing would be happening. People sat at empty desks reading the newspaper, chatting – or literally doing nothing, staring, bored. Everyone was waiting for instructions from above. Initiative was discouraged.*

*Some time later, when I had finally been allowed to go to the provinces, I listen as my Lao colleague from the Ministry expresses her frustration with a teacher. She tells him, "You can't wait for us to give you everything and tell you what to do. Times have changed. You must think for yourself now. You'll never move forward if you can't decide for yourself". Ah, yes, I think to myself, something is changing – but is it changing, really changing, underneath?*

## Return

When I returned to Vientiane it was almost eighteen months since AusAID assistance to the English for Government Officials program had ceased. My intention, during this second stage of fieldwork, was to research if and how the Lao stakeholders had overcome the practical, political and cultural challenges they had faced as the LEFAP project was drawing to a close. As in my previous field trip, I canvassed the views of administrators, counterparts and teachers, but this time I also sought, through interviews and surveys, the views of students (see Appendix 6). My previous investigation had been deliberately broad in its focus in order to leave open the possibilities for widely ranging Lao responses. This later investigation was narrower, focusing on the specific issues that had emerged from the previous multivoice reconstruction. Eighteen months before, the Lao stakeholders in all locations had articulated commitment to the program. This was despite the project having been insufficiently grounded in the socio-political realities of Laos necessary for a secure and stable program to have been established before AusAID withdrew its support. As a consequence, in this chapter, the post-project experiences of Lao stakeholders are woven into stories around the previously documented disjunctions between:

- Lao and donor priorities in regard to project focus
- Lao post-project responsibility for institutionalising the program and the building of management capacity
- Lao post-project responsibility for staffing and the number of teachers trained
- Teacher knowledge and provisions for upgrading
- Lao post-project responsibility for recurrent costs and the building of capacity for income generation at the ELRC
- The English language training needs of Lao government officials and the extent of the curriculum pathway provided
- The demands of a competency-based approach and Lao cultural expectations.

The stories depict the continuing evolution of the Lao socio-political path to modernisation. Some tell of the accelerated pace of change in the capital city, some of

the effects of which have been described in the ‘Snapshot of change’ that began this chapter. These Vientiane-based stories reveal how AusAID intractability resulted in a wastage of project funding and a consequent failure to support the country’s move towards decentralisation. The provincial stories tell of the changes ushered in by this policy and reveal how it had resulted in a widening gap between program provision and need. They reveal how the inadequacy of the project design to meet these needs constrained the ability of government officials to express their development priorities in local and regional forums and thereby limited their ability to take charge of their country’s development process. The stories contain examples of the hegemonic hold of the dominant discourse on the thinking of development workers, but they also demonstrate how culturally and politically aware Lao stakeholders are attempting to overcome the disjunctions. The most powerful of these is the emergence, eighteen months after project funding had ceased, of the ‘Middle Way’ solution to the disjunction between ‘foreigner’ values and Lao values.

## **Conflicting priorities**

During the project, much time and effort (and therefore funding) had been spent on the training of teachers so that Vientiane-based ministries could establish their own English for Government Officials programs. Eighteen months after project funding ceased, the records held at the ELRC – the hub of the network of providers – revealed that this had had no effect on the number of ministries providing English language tuition. As shown below in Table 6, rather than the 40 anticipated ministries, only seven (not including the ELRC) were making use of the availability of the custom-made materials in order to provide English language training for their staff. This was two *fewer* than were conducting the courses during the LEFAP project. As the table shows, with the exception of the ELRC, the English language units still operational were those already institutionalised within their ministries before the LEFAP intervention, i.e. the ministries providing English classes for their officials had reverted to pre-project numbers. In contrast, while the project had focussed on five provinces, fourteen provinces had now established their own programs. Investigations revealed these outcomes to be a direct result of changing socio-political circumstances.

**Table 6: The changing network of provision**

Vientiane-based providers				Provincial providers			
Pre-project	Proposed	During LEFAP	Post- project	Pre-project	Proposed	During LEFAP	Post- project
Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ministry of National Defence Ministry of National Security Ministry of Communications, Transport, Posts and Construction Ministry of Justice Vientiane Municipality Ministry of Health	40 Ministries and mass organisations	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ministry of National Defence Ministry of National Security Ministry of Communications, Transport, Posts and Construction Ministry of Justice Vientiane Municipality Ministry of Health Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare Ministry of Finance	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ministry of National Defence Ministry of National Security Ministry of Communications, Transport, Posts and Construction Ministry of Justice Vientiane Municipality Ministry of Health <i>Defunct</i> <i>Additional:</i> ELRC (Ministry of Education)	<u>Focal provs</u> Savannakhet Champasak  Possible unknown non-focal others	<u>5 focal provs</u> Savannakhet Champasak Luang Prabang Vientiane Xiengkhouang	<u>5 focal provs</u> Savannakhet Champasak Luang Prabang Vientiane Xiengkhouang  Possible unknown others	<u>5 focal provs</u> Savannakhet Champasak Luang Prabang Vientiane Xiengkhouang  <u>'Others'</u> Sayaboury Khamouane Borikhamsay Oudomsay Saysomboune Special Zone Houaphan Saravan Attapeu Phongsaly



Table 7 shows that of the 57 ministry personnel who completed training, only 20 were teaching the courses, i.e. approximately 65% of those ministry personnel trained to teach the program were not involved in doing so. While the last column suggests that the reason for the non-utilisation of the training could have partially resulted from the failure of program administrators to fulfil their responsibility of preventing staff transfer and attrition, further investigation revealed that the answers lay elsewhere.

**Table 7: Utilisation of teacher training in Vientiane**

Vientiane-based venues	Number trained	Number teaching EGO courses	Explanation
M. National Security	4	3	1 resigned
M. National Defence	14	6	1 resigned 1 to other ministry 4 changed departments
M. Foreign Affairs	4	2	2 studying in Japan
M. Communication, Transport, Posts & Construction	5	5	-
National Organisation for the Study of Policy and Administration (NOSPA)	5	0	Continued using commercial texts.
M. Labour & Social Welfare	4	0	New ELT unit disbanded
M. Finance	4	0	ELT unit not sustained
M. Information & Culture	3	0	No ELT unit
Vientiane Politics and Administration School	2	0	No ELT Unit
Lao Revolutionary Youth Union	4	0	Own curriculum developed by foreign advisor.
M. Health	1	1	-
M. Justice	2	2	-
Vientiane Municipality (Foreign Language & Vocational Training Centre)	5	1	2 changed departments 2 never deployed to teach English

As can be seen in the table, only two project-trained staff had subsequently resigned from their ministries, both of whom worked in units that continued to function and to use the course materials. Moreover, only eight (7%) of those who attended training had either been transferred to other departments or had never been deployed to teach classes. As none of these had been teaching before the training, the

explanation of a counterpart, who considered that their administrators had never intended them to do so, is probable. She remarked, *'You know, many people need English for their work now so I think it was a good opportunity for some people to upgrade their English, not just teachers'* (Counterpart 6). An additional explanation was suggested by a teacher who believed that his ministry had intended that all staff sent for teaching would subsequently teach, but *'Things changed after that and their English is needed for their new jobs'* (Teacher 20).

One highly significant change was that, in spite of the project's failure to promote English classes within ministries, Vientiane-based officials now had access to affordable, good quality English language provision using the LEFAP custom-made, government-approved materials. The national coordinator's radical plans for income generation had come to fruition in that the ELRC was now successfully conducting evening classes. Their relevance, the cost and the quality of teaching were proving very popular amongst officials. Another popular choice was conducted by the National University of Laos (NUOL). This evening course – the “Special Course” – was a three year diploma course combining LEFAP materials with others. Between the ELRC and NUOL, large numbers of officials were catered for. Drawing teachers from the skilled LEFAP counterpart group, the ELRC ran classes for 85 officials a night, while NUOL, with its larger premises and large English language department, could cater nightly for several hundred. A former teacher explained how this change had impacted on the thinking of the administrators of the now-defunct English language unit in his ministry:

*It's cheaper for our ministry to send officials to learn English outside [of our ministry]. And the teachers are more skilled. I had two jobs for a while – my usual work and then I was in charge of the EL unit and teaching our staff. But it's better for them to go to the ELRC or to the Special Course at NUOL because they have better teachers (Teacher 14).*

Thus, the unforeseen outcome of the LEFAP intervention had negated the need for ministries to establish and maintain their own programs. Another indicator of the changing times – the increasing prosperity in Vientiane – also contributed to administrator decisions: a survey of students at the ELRC confirmed that the majority were ministry employees and, significantly, that 85% of these officials were both able and willing to pay for their own tuition. Those who weren't self-funded were involved in projects which were paying their fees or, in a few cases, were paid for by their

ministries or were employees of non-government organisations (NGO). With staff paying for their own external classes, there was little point in maintaining an inferior option within the ministries. Consequently, administrators were free to deploy those staff who had attended LEFAP training to other areas requiring their English skills.

In stark contrast to the project outcomes in Vientiane, there had been a dramatic expansion of programs in the provinces, with fourteen of the country's eighteen provinces now implementing programs for their officials, as shown in the chart of the network of provision on page 148. That this had always been the intention of the Lao government was confirmed by the national coordinator from the Ministry of Education, who considered the project to have been wrongly focussed. He explained:

*LEFAP talked about ministries too much, so during the project we worked with that design but at the same time we need to involve the other provinces. We need to upgrade their English language also – not just in five provinces. It was a very limited project area. That's why we organised a meeting every year. In the provinces we had to push them. It's very difficult for them. They have no experience. We have to push the provinces. That's why we could not just focus on the ministries. If we don't push them then they cannot collaborate properly with donors (Administrator 2).*

Some consultants working in Vientiane were sceptical about the need for such widespread English language skills, considering the inclusion in classes of district-level officials to be an example of the patron-client system or a cheap reward for loyalty to the system. One consultant stated:

*English language is highly valued. It's what an upwardly mobile person wants. So if it's of value then it's tradable. So offering a place to someone from a remote district could be a pay-off for a past favour, you might have a member of your family out there that you want to do something for, it could be used to curry favour. There wouldn't be many people at a provincial level who could provide much of a rationale for providing English classes at remote district level. The patronage issue is alive and well despite the socialist revolution. The patrons now are the officials. They've got access to favour and they distribute it (Consultant 5).*

Another said:

*I've been thinking about why the MOE expanded into other provinces. OK it's in the human development plan and you could say that's why but I think it's in the plan because it's a very cheap way of placating a lot of government officials who always say they don't get anything from Vientiane. They're giving them English language. I can't see that all of them need it – it's a political*

*propaganda thing and it will placate government officials in the provinces and the districts. It'll be, "Oh but we're giving you English language and you've always wanted that" A very cheap way – a cheap way of placating people (Consultant 3).*

The dominant development discourse can easily be recognised in the words of these two consultants. However, attention to the articulation of local knowledge, values and needs revealed a different viewpoint. To the Lao, the provision of language programs was an essential, but costly, undertaking requiring much commitment from all concerned:

*Sending people to the Government Officials course is a big commitment because they are away from their work for nine months. This is a big investment so students must be committed to learning. We need value for money so we need to know that students will be able to study well [have aptitude]. We have other choices, for example, we can send them to the 'Special course' for a year. But this is also a big investment. Students must be available for evening study so [their workplace must agree to] no travel to the grassroots level, no study tour (Administrator 17).*

The necessity was fuelled by the decentralisation policy – a policy promoted by other development agencies and in its early stages of implementation in Laos. As a result, a plethora of development assistance projects were being mounted in remote areas, and responsibilities formerly undertaken at central level now delegated to lower levels. The impact of decentralisation and its resulting increased need for English was explained by an HRD official from Savannakhet. His enthusiasm for the development occurring in his province is clearly heard:

*... during the LEFAP project, we taught staff from the near districts but now we've changed the target group to the far districts because they also need to relate to foreigners. They really need English and they're really enthusiastic. Decentralisation has meant that more projects are located there, for example, there are now many NGO and bi-lateral projects about poverty reduction. There are target districts along Road Number 9 – this area is developing now. We have community development projects there because the road makes it easier to reach remote communities and because it increases trade and tourism opportunities. The road, we call it the 'ASEAN Road' because it links three ASEAN countries. We're not 'land-locked' any more, we're 'road-linked'! So, we need staff to go with the projects to the villages and remote areas. They must speak to the villagers for the project and interpret for the foreign consultants. We have not enough staff in the city to help with all these projects so the districts really need to learn (Administrator 16).*

The official is acutely aware of the roles played in the nation's development of both decentralisation and increased engagement in the region. The 'ASEAN Road' passes through Savannakhet Province linking Thailand and Vietnam. It symbolises the reconstruction taking place in the Lao and foreigner discourse: the isolated, 'land-locked' nation of its colonial past is being reconstructed into a strategically-placed, regionally-integrated nation providing a vital trade and tourism 'road-link' or 'land-link' between wealthier neighbours. As well as these international economic opportunities, the road, as the official described, enables donors to reach the poorest communities living in previously inaccessible areas. District-level officials currently studying English came from the districts of Atsaphangthong, Outhoumphon, Xonboully and Nong. A student from the Atsaphangthong District Public Health Department reported that projects with which his department worked included a World Bank primary health care project, an HIV project funded by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and a World Vision mother and child care project. An ADB project for strengthening decentralised education management was working in the remote districts of Xonboully and Nong as well as Outhoumphon District (UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2003:30), which, like Atsaphangthong District, is situated on the 'ASEAN Road'. These projects represent only a fraction of those taking place in the four districts.

A similar explosion of projects was taking place in other districts and other provinces. This newly emerged focus on the districts, driven by the UN Millennium Goal of 'Poverty Alleviation' and facilitated by the Lao decentralisation policy, had created a demand for English that could not be met at provincial level alone. AusAID, like other donor agencies, had pledged to work towards the UN goal of poverty alleviation. However, AusAID's inflexible project time-lines and strict adherence to its previously designated outcomes meant that it was unable to respond to changing socio-political circumstances. While the Lao policy on decentralisation was being initiated, AusAID insisted on its focus on the centre. The results of this disjunction exemplify the wastage of development assistance funding when agencies fail to respond appropriately to changing realities.

### **Provincial management capacity and institutionalisation**

The LEFAP project design had stipulated that once the project ended the responsibility for the on-going funding of the English program was entirely in Lao

hands. The project design had taken no responsibility for how this would be achieved, and the Lao Ministry of Education had only been able to fund one seminar a year to assist provincial administrators to develop their management capacity. When I had left Laos eighteen months previously, provincial administrators were still uncertain of their ability to fund their programs, with many pinning hope on finding another donor. The financial concerns of administrators were deepened by the increasing pressure to extend the curriculum pathway to provide appropriate provision to district officials without previous access to English.

Information from the ELRC, as shown in Table 6 (page 148) was that all five of the focal provinces had successfully maintained their programs. In the light of the disjunction between management capacity – as articulated in a number of reports (cf. page 107) – and the building of this during project implementation, I was keen to investigate how, and to what extent, the provinces had brought their plans to fruition. While I was interested in the ‘additional’ provinces which had established their programs without LEFAP assistance, time constraints meant that I concentrated on the original five focal provinces of the project, although I was able gain some insights into the other provinces through one short ‘side trip’ and through remarks of the national coordinator and counterparts.

The national coordinator was not only convinced that the project had its priorities wrong by concentrating on the ministries, but thought the focus on only five provinces was too narrow. These five were already advantaged over the others by being home to the major urban centres apart from the capital city, and home to the nation’s five teacher training colleges. They had received attention in the past from international donors concerned with, among other things, the construction and strengthening of these institutions. In addition, Luang Prabang and, more recently, Champasak are home to World Heritage sites, and Xiengkhouang is home to the famed ‘Plain of Jars’. Consequently, these three have benefited from the nation’s focus on increasing tourism as a means of raising revenue. In addition, all five provinces have the advantage of having international borders, with Savannakhet sharing borders with both Vietnam and Thailand. In the national coordinator’s view, they were not the most in need of assistance. He commented:

*For the rich provinces it’s OK but for the poor provinces its difficult for them to organise – to make it sustainable. Its OK for Savannakhet or Pakse but for some provinces we hope to ask some volunteers to cooperate with the PES [Provincial Education*

*Service] – to strengthen them, to help them to think how to train the government officials (Administrator 2).*

When I visited one of the nation's poorest provinces, this view was reiterated by an official who lamented with some bewilderment:

*Our teachers didn't do any training to teach these courses. We didn't get any help from the project. We are a poor province. We also need our officials to speak English. We have many projects here now. But we didn't get any help (Administrator 18).*

Investigations, which I will discuss later, into how the teachers were coping in the five richer provinces suggested the veracity of these words. These five provinces had all been successful, to varying degrees, in securing funds for their programs (see Table 8, below) with two provinces having realised their ideal of securing the assistance from other international donors. Both of these, but only one of the provinces funding their own programs, had continued to provide two classes concurrently as had been done under LEFAP. Two provinces had also extended the curriculum by adding a 'pre-course' to cater for non-script students.

**Table 8: Post-LEFAP provincial funding**

Funding source	Province	Current classes	Provision of Pre-course
Project supported	Luang Prabang	2	Yes
	Xiengkhouang	2	No
HRD funded	Champasak	-	No
	Vientiane	1	No
	Savannahket	2	Yes

Of those with project funding, the Luang Prabang program was now supported by the UNDP-funded 'Support to Governance and Public Administration Reform' (GPAR) project. This was a pilot project with a view to extending to other provinces. The HRD also had the assistance of a JICA project to teach students without the script so they had the required competency to access Level 1 of the LEFAP course. In Xiengkhouang Province, the program was funded by a Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) road-building project, as was the program in neighbouring Houaphan Province. In both provinces all the students were from the Department of Communication, Transport, Posts and Construction and, according to the teacher-coordinator, all came with the appropriate competency to access Level 1 of the curriculum. As in other provinces which had not benefited from LEFAP

training, only Levels 1 and 2 were taught in Houaphan. The program there, including the assessments, was overseen by a LEFAP-trained teacher-coordinator from Xiengkhouang. Because of the limited number of teaching staff, the provinces were unable to run additional classes for officials from other departments. However, the DANIDA-funded classes were small (there were twelve in the Xiengkhouang Level 2 class and only five in the Level 3 class), suggesting the possibility that they could have been ‘topped up’ with other students without additional cost to the province. When I put this possibility to administrators they admitted that it had not been considered. They were, however, keen to discuss issues, with one commenting *‘your visit is a motivator – it’s an opportunity to get together and discuss things’* (Administrator 4), causing me to reflect again on the missed potential of the LEFAP project design to incorporate meetings for ‘sharing’ ideas.

The three provinces which were now relying on their own resources had had varying degrees of success. The first of these, Vientiane Province, had continued without a break since LEFAP funding ceased but had scaled provision down from two classes to one. A teacher explained the reduction as resulting from staff shortages, saying, *‘In the past we had more teachers and we had 2 classes. Now we have fewer teachers and only one class’* (Teacher 3). For administrators, the biggest problem continued to be the fulfilment of plans to include district level officials. This was seen more as a difficulty with accommodation than budget because, one explained, *‘it’s difficult to take those who live far from the TTC because we don’t have enough dormitories so we can only take about five for each class’* (Administrator 6).

These students came, I was told, from districts (Vang Vieng, Keo Oudom and Fuang) where English was needed because of an explosion in tourism, for security reasons, and because they were involved in education projects. Teachers reported no difficulties with their levels of competency, even though this province was one of those that had previously allowed those without competency to attend. This significant change had occurred, in one teacher’s opinion, because of the influence of a LEFAP-trained teacher who had been transferred to the Provincial Education Service:

*We don’t get people with no script. The people they send for assessment can write. The problem happened once. They want to send students from the far districts but the district makes a selection first and they’re not sending people who haven’t got English basic. They check because one teacher who taught here*



*before is working for the HRD now so he understands and he selects (Teacher 3).*

The teacher-turned-administrator's understanding of the pedagogical implications of the procedures of the competency based approach had apparently been effective in bringing about change in this province which had previously been experiencing difficulties. However, while this had solved some problems, it had not solved all because there was no formal provision for training officials without the required competency for Level 1. In the above teacher's opinion, programs needed to be established at district level because of staff shortages at the college:

*At this time a lot of people in the rural area, in the far districts, want to study. They ask HRD to send them to study here but they don't have the basic language so we cannot receive them. I think they can't get the basic level in their district. If they want to send those people to study, they should set up classes for them. We can't teach them here because we don't have enough teachers (Teacher 3).*

There was no pressing need as yet because accommodation constraints meant more district officials could not be included in the courses and those who were included were those who could gain their basic English through their own resources. The situation, however, has implications for the longer term sustainability of the provision if others at district level are unable to gain the required competency to access the LEFAP-developed course.

At the time, however, both administrators and teachers in Vientiane Province appeared calmly confident about their program. This contrasted strongly with the mood in Champasak Province where teachers were dispirited because, in the eighteen months since LEFAP had finished, they had only conducted one four-month course. In the absence of external funding, the administrators had greatly reduced their provision of English classes for their officials. Teachers were concerned about the pedagogical difficulties facing students when their study was disrupted. One pointed out:

*If they must wait a long time before they go to the next level, they forget a lot of their English because after just Level 1 or even Level 2, they're not strong enough to use it much in their office (Teacher 16).*

It was puzzling that this province should have been unable to maintain continuous provision as it was one of the richest, being one of only five provinces that had an excess of revenue over expenses in the 1999-2000 budgetary year

(Viallancourt, 2001:14). It was difficult to find out the details of the decision-making because, in spite of agreeing to the timing of my visit, departmental heads were involved in the annual financial planning meetings with the Governor. This included those who managed the English for Government Officials courses for the province, and so I was asked to speak with their deputies, not all of whom had information. However, a change of staffing at the top level of the teacher training college may have affected decisions.

Political manoeuvrings may also have motivated the decision, as suggested in an interview with an HRD official who revealed much information about the funding arrangements. The Champasak HRD official regretted that they would be unable to fund more than one four-month course again that year. He agreed that officials needed to further their studies, and said the planned course would enable those who had completed Level 2 to continue on to Level 3. He explained that they had not received the finances they had requested from the Ministry of Finance in Vientiane. He consulted paperwork and explained further that, whereas they had asked for 97,000,000 kip (approximately \$US970) for the English courses, they had received only 18,000,000 kip (US\$180) and so there would only be one course. They had made this request despite being aware before LEFAP finished that on-going funding would be their responsibility and they had previously expressed commitment to the continuation of the program. The HRD was now, belatedly, attempting to boost its finances by gaining the support of individual government workplaces in the provincial capital, Pakse. The official explained:

*The directors of departments are committed to this program so we will invite a department, for example, the Department of Public Health, to plan who they want trained, and we will ask them to contribute a small amount to the 18,000,000 kip we already have (Administrator 14).*

The HRD official commented that *'districts further away need English in every sector but we cannot afford for all'*. He then added, making clear the extent of HRD support for the inclusion of district officials, that, *'If the district officials don't have English writing, the Districts will have to organise courses. We cannot do this'* (Administrator 14).

The enthusiasm I encountered in neighbouring Savannakhet Province provided a strong counterpoint to the mood in Champasak. Also among the richest five provinces (Viallancourt, 2001:14), Savannakhet had been the most successful of

the three HRD-funded programs in organising its budget and had continued, as had been the case under LEFAP, to conduct two classes concurrently. Unlike Champasak Province, Savannakhet was committed to enabling access to its district officials but was struggling financially:

*Our big problem is the budget. Savannakhet is a big province. We have fifteen districts so we need a bigger budget to get people from remote regions. This is a big problem, the budget (Administrator 16).*

Nevertheless, I found administrators and teachers to be full of optimism. This is captured in a journal entry, recorded below, of my impressions of how the possibilities of income-generation, and access to information – in Savannakhet’s case because of proximity to the Thai border – was stimulating thought, action and change.

#### *JOURNAL ENTRY: Possibilities*

*When my Lao colleague and I visited the Savannakhet Teacher Training College this time, we were struck by the pride and optimism of students and staff. On a tour of the college, the student-maintained gardens were pointed out, the wooden artwork structures built by students and displayed in the grounds were admired. Struck by the cleanliness, my colleague exclaimed, ‘We can’t smell the toilets!’*

*The Director (Administrator 7) talked of the new possibilities now that the college, like the ELRC, was allowed to generate income. He told us that the Provincial Tourist Authority had entered into an agreement with the college to hire English teachers to upgrade the English of tour guides. ‘There are many possibilities’, he said. ‘We could run basic English classes for traders and tuk tuk drivers like they did in Thailand for the APEC meeting’. Then he paused before adding, ‘but we lack human resources so we can’t advertise our services’. The expertise of two of the most skilled teachers was sorely missed while they studied abroad but nevertheless, the possibilities were exciting. The administrator talked enthusiastically of the great potential for Savannakhet when the new bridge across the Mekong is finished<sup>25</sup>. He said, ‘Thai people can come here to study English or maybe we can have an exchange program. Thailand will be only 3 kilometres away. We can have paying students. When Achan Somphoui and Achan Phanthaboun come back [from their study abroad] we will have stronger teachers. Our teachers have*

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<sup>25</sup> The third bridge linking Laos and Thailand. The first was the Australian-donated *Khua Mitthapharp* (Friendship Bridge) not far from Vientiane city. The second is in Champasak province. All enhance trade and other exchange possibilities with Thailand and the region (see page 53).

*better methodology, Thai people have told me. Achan Sivilay and I know a Thai family through our studies in Thailand. Their daughter came here to study because they said it was better than in Thailand'.*

*The excitement was fuelled by the access to information gained through his studies in Thailand. Every weekend, he and a senior English teacher catch a bus to the river, a ferry across the Mekong, passing through customs and immigration on both sides of the river, and then take another bus to their university in Thailand to study Educational Administration. The senior English teacher had brought back ideas which had been implemented in the English Department. He was proud of these innovations which gave the teacher trainee student population opportunities to engage in self-generated communicative activities outside of the classroom context. My colleague and I decided that the freedom to implement such innovations, to have an input into the future direction of the college, had sparked the changes we had observed on first arriving.*

The stories of these five focal provinces show that they had, to greater or lesser extents, secured the funding necessary to maintain the provision established during the project. These provinces were, as the national coordinator pointed out, the least in need. For them, the Ministry-organised annual capacity-building meetings – described by the coordinator eighteen months previously (see pages 132-133) – appear to have been sufficient. However, the possibility of overlooked opportunities for providing for students, as well as the problem facing them all of how to provide for district-level students, suggests that administrators would have benefited, as articulated by one of the administrators, from the ‘*opportunity to get together and discuss things*’ (Administrator 4). Moreover, management capacity is more than budgeting. To provide a quality program, administrators need to understand the educational change they are managing. The importance of this was overlooked in the LEFAP project design, which included no meetings for administrators. Consequently, while teachers had been quick to recognise that the competency-based approach to classroom placement resulted in improved learning conditions (cf. Chapter 6), some administrators appear to have been slower to do so. For many, understanding of optimal language learning conditions had only come into being as ex-teachers and ex-students moved into program management positions.

Like the disjunction between Lao and donor priorities, the disjunction between the project designated responsibility for institutionalisation and management capacity is rooted in donor lack of attention to the socio-political reality in which the project is

being implemented. In contrast to the disjunction between the Lao and donor priorities, which resulted in a wastage of donor funding, the project's lack of attention to the building of management capacity and management understanding had wasted scarce provincial funding.

## Staffing needs and numbers trained

As well as funding, Lao stakeholders were responsible, according to the project design, for providing sufficient incentives to mitigate the attrition from the program of teachers trained by the project. Eighteen months earlier, teachers were sceptical and warned of a lessening of effort if they were required to teach on inadequately funded programs. Eighteen months later, as discussed previously, in Vientiane city the English skills of those who attended training were often seen as better utilised elsewhere than in a classroom. In contrast, the retention of provincial teachers of the English for Government Officials courses had been relatively stable with most of those trained by LEFAP still engaged in teaching the courses. In Table 9, it can be seen that whereas only 35% of the Vientiane-based teachers who attended training were engaged in teaching the government officials classes, 69% of the provincial teachers were still conducting the classes.

**Table 9: Teachers trained during the LEFAP project**

<b>Numbers of teachers</b>	<b>7 operational Vientiane-based ELT units</b>	<b>5 major provincial centres</b>
<b>Trained</b>	57	26
<b>Currently available</b>	20	18

Two provincial teachers had been transferred to the Provincial Education Service but the majority of those not actively engaged in teaching were those who, like the two teachers mentioned in the journal entry above and as shown in Table 10 on the next page, had won scholarships to study abroad for Master's degrees – a level of study not available to them in Laos. The loss of their expertise, as suggested by the comments in the journal entry, was causing difficulties, but their absence was temporary, with administrators anticipating that their upgraded knowledge would beneficially contribute to the programs on their return. The movement of two teachers to the Provincial Education Service was also more of a benefit than a loss, with them now being, as we heard previously, in positions in which they could advise on implementation.

**Table 10: Availability of Level 3-trained teachers**

	Location	Number trained	Available	Reason for absence
P R O V I N C E	Savannakhet	2	0	1 studying in Japan 1 studying in Thailand
	Champasak	2	2	-
	Vientiane	3	2	1 studying in Japan
	Xiengkhouang	2	1	1 studying in Japan
	Luang Prabang	2	1	1 studying in Australia

As Tables 9 and 10 show, the teacher attrition anticipated in the project design and by program administrators had not eventuated in the provinces. Nor had teachers' fears of severely diminished pay eventuated. In all but Champasak Province, teachers were receiving a steady income of 7,000-8,000 kip (70-80 US cents) per hour for teaching the classes. Although most had received 10,000 kip under LEFAP, teachers were satisfied with the current amount, which was a secure supplement to the official salaries. Teachers' status was also secure because, as a teachers college director pointed out, *'we help in our country's development by providing teachers. And we provide the best teachers'* (Administrator 15). In another province, the HRD Director commented that, although their pay wasn't much, teachers gave for the good of the country. Then, quoting a Lao proverb, which emphasises the symbolic nature of the teachers' commitment, he added, *'The value of work cannot be measured in money'* (Administrator 14). Thus, through the economic and symbolic capital gain teaching government officials brought to teachers, administrators in the five focal provinces had been able to fulfil their project designated responsibilities to retain the staff trained by the project.

While there was adequate incentive for teachers to remain committed, as administrators had predicted, the paucity of numbers trained during the life of the project (as shown in Tables 9 and 10 above) was adversely affecting their ability to provide quality programs, particularly at the highest level of the curriculum. Moreover, as we will hear in the next section, the disjunction between the staffing needs and the numbers trained by the project was exacerbating the disjunction between teacher knowledge and the project provisions for upgrading that knowledge.

## Teacher knowledge and provisions for upgrading

Provisions for knowledge upgrading include not only training but access to relevant resources. Eighteen months previously, we heard that the length of the training provided for teaching the highest level of the curriculum had left teachers concerned about the adequacy of their knowledge to fulfil their students' needs. We also heard that the project design had paid little attention to the relevance of the existing resources in the Self Access Centres AusAID had previously established for the benefit of teachers and government officials (cf. Chapter 4, page 73).

For those who had now taught the Level 3 course a number of times, difficulties had diminished as they became more familiar with the course book. Many, like Teacher 3, quoted below, had worked hard to overcome their limitations by making use of the limited available resources to upgrade their knowledge:

*I feel confident about my teaching now. Before I wasn't confident enough. Even though I know [knew] the steps of teaching, at that time I was weak at English. But this time my language is quite good. I can explain according to the instruction I can show my knowledge what the students need to know. I can talk about legal words like I can talk about economic, about education or agriculture. I learnt from the 'Vientiane Times' [newspaper] and from the UNDP reports we got from LEFAP. Also from teaching Level 3. I feel confident about teaching the topics now. But I need more so I listen to the radio in the morning, like the 'Voice of America'. They speak very slowly and I understand. When I want to do something, I must do everything to reach my goal (Teacher 3).*

Nevertheless, difficulties remained with the 'uncontrolled' work-related vocabulary that surfaced in the classroom:

*The content we have taught before is OK for us. We've taught this book 3 times now. But the vocabulary in Level 3 is difficult. Students want us to translate but sometimes we don't know. It's not the vocabulary in the book that's difficult but the specialist vocabulary of their field (Teacher 3).*

Some students were more able than others to independently gain the specific English of their field. One, for example, said, 'My work is irrigation and roads construction. I studied irrigation vocabulary myself'. However, many, like those quoted below, agreed that their teachers' lack of specialised vocabulary was a constraint to their learning:

*'The teacher must make an effort to know more on 'official words' [specific vocabulary] and teach more of these words' (Student: Information and Culture Division, Vientiane Province).*

*'The problem for English teachers is they don't understand work vocabulary'* (Ex-student: Savannakhet Department of Finance).

*'It's a problem when we want to know some vocabulary or some words in my job, but teacher don't know'* (Ex-student: Luang Prabang Irrigation and Roads Construction Enterprise).

These constraints were exacerbated in provinces where experienced Level 3-trained teachers were temporarily unavailable to teach the highest level of the course because they were studying in another country. In the absence of these experienced teachers, administrators were forced to assign other teachers – teachers who had not had the opportunity of either LEFAP training or previous teaching in order to expand their knowledge base. Difficulties were particularly pronounced in Savannakhet Province where both of its two Level 3-trained teachers were now absent, although the HRD had prepared for their departure as adequately as possible within the limits of their budget by funding a one-week workshop conducted by the two Level 3 teachers and one of the ex-counterparts.

With teachers feeling ill-equipped and insecure after six weeks training (see Chapter 6, pages 123-124), it is not surprising that the one-week HRD-funded training was proving inadequate. One teacher commented, *'Some lessons, the teacher doesn't have knowledge, for example, about justice – and so it's difficult to teach'* (Teacher 22). A disturbing lack of knowledge was revealed when one teacher confided, *'Before I taught about economic development I asked many people "What is this? What is economic development?" But many people, they don't know'* (Teacher 23). Eighteen months earlier, teachers had commented on the difficulty for themselves and their students in accessing information because of the lack of relevant resources in the Resource Centres/ Self Access Centres. Eighteen months later, former students agreed. One considered that *'The Resource Centre needs up-to-date documents and information'* (Ex-student: Savannakhet Organisation Department), while another said, *'I think it needs a lot of materials in the Self Access Centre, for example, on public health, finance, trade, communications'* (Ex-student/Administrator 16). The difficulty this caused was summed up by a teacher who remarked that, without other access to information, *'We have to help each other and so we don't know if we're right or not'* (Teacher 25).

A survey of provincial students revealed their views of their teachers' knowledge. Significantly, students in provinces with teachers with the highest levels of English, and where at least one teacher had studied abroad, reported the most



satisfaction with their teachers' level of knowledge. In the remaining provinces, students expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction. In contrast to the LEFAP project design, their comments, some of which are recorded below, show an acute awareness of the socio-economic factors which had led to their teachers' lack of knowledge:

*The teachers haven't the knowledge but the Lao government cannot upgrade them and to promote the facilities for teachers: high salary, vehicle, land and house. This situation affects to the responsibilities of the teachers' (Ex-student: Provincial Finance Department, Savannahket).*

*The majority of teachers are not good in some of the issues in Laos. Some of the teachers have never been on excursions to other provinces. They have only learnt from newspapers (Student: Agricultural Promotion Bank, Vientiane Province).*

*Teachers have limited scientific, historical and social knowledge, as well as general knowledge (Student: Vientiane Province Office of the Governor).*

*Some teachers haven't enough general knowledge to teach the course well because they have less experience, they have only studied in University of Laos or at the TTC [teacher training college] (Ex-student, Organisation Department of Savannahket Province: Head of Division to Upgrade the Knowledge of Lao Government Officials).*

From these comments it is clear that a disjunction remained between the provision for upgrading provincial teachers' knowledge – the training and resources provided by the project – and the knowledge needed to teach the courses. The inadequacy of the project response – the lack of attention to the social reality of provincial teachers – is highlighted by the responses of students studying at the highest level at the ELRC. In contrast to the responses of provincial students, 77% of these were satisfied with their teachers' levels of knowledge. Unlike the provincial teachers, those at the ELRC had all travelled abroad, some extensively and to a number of countries. Some had also travelled within Laos for work purposes and had previously worked on projects. In addition, being in the capital city, they had access to a more extensive, although still limited, range of resources. These experiences contrast strongly with the parochial experiences of their provincial colleagues and suggest that an appropriate response would have been to broaden teachers' knowledge base by facilitating access to information and by providing a training program extensive enough to incorporate experiential activities.

## Recurrent funding and capacity building at the ELRC

As a result of these training limitations, Lao stakeholder voices had eighteen months previously articulated a clear need for the continued support of programs. Counterparts had seen their post-project role as being the continued provision of materials, the monitoring of programs, and the provision of training. In accordance with the project design, it was the responsibility of the Ministry of Education to develop strategies for generating the income necessary to provide for this on-going support. Towards the end of project funding, the Ministry of Education had been considering a radical plan, involving the commercialisation of ELRC services, in order to generate the necessary funds. Despite the ELRC staff's lack of commercial experience, and in spite of the ADB's advice about the need for projects to include training in income generation for self-sustainability (ADB, 2000:209), AusAID refused the Ministry's request for assistance.

Eighteen months later, the system of selling course materials in order to fund subsequent print runs was continuing to function effectively. An ELRC staff member explained, *'We print 1000 each time because it's cheaper. We've had three print runs in total. In January we'll print 3000 more – 1000 for each level. There are many provinces now that organise the Government Officials course'* (Counterpart 2). Counterparts had developed a small amount of additional assessment tasks, and the plans to develop supplementary materials had at last come to fruition after the placement by Australian Volunteers International (AVI) of a volunteer at the ELRC, who had so far developed materials to supplement Level 1 of the course with funding from AusAID's Direct Assistance Program (DAP).

There were difficulties, however, in marketing these products. In accordance with the DAP submission, a free copy of the supplementary materials had been sent to each provincial teacher training college. All other venues would have to pay, and the price was high (US\$12). At that point in time it was far from certain that ministries and the remaining provinces would be able to afford them. Saravane Province, for example, having not yet been able to afford the core listening materials or a cassette recorder on which to play them, was likely to find the cost of the supplementary materials prohibitive. One ministry-based teacher, on hearing (during our interview) of the availability of the materials, commented worriedly, *'I must write a proposal to my unit to buy the new supplementary materials – 120,000 kip. But money is limited in my unit'* (Teacher 13). Another Vientiane-based teacher commented, *'I haven't*

*heard from (the ELRC) about new assessment tasks. We use the old ones that we have from during LEFAP' (Teacher 18). This lack of promotion prompted my colleague from the Ministry of Education to comment, 'Maybe the ELRC doesn't know they should contact the people who are using the course books and tell them they have supplementary materials. So we need to look at the role of the ELRC again. We need ... to clarify the roles of the ELRC – to make it bigger than now' (Counterpart 3).*

While the ELRC had achieved a degree of success in the provision of materials, there had been no monitoring of programs and very little training. Eighteen months before, we heard that the provision of such support relied on the fulfilment of the Ministry of Education's radical plans to allow the ELRC to generate the income. The success of these plans was contingent on approval from the authorities and the establishment of viable systems. Approval had clearly been received because the ELRC was now engaged in conducting income-generating evening classes. The booming business comprised one Level 1 class, two Level 2 classes and two Level 3 classes. Four four-month courses – staffed by some former counterparts and the most able of ministry teachers trained under LEFAP – had already been conducted and there was a waiting list for the next course. A counterpart explained the system for managing the income generated:

*There is a financial advice from the Ministry of Education: 55% of the total income goes to teachers, 15% goes for the maintenance of the centre – air conditioners and so on. 20% is for academic things like the development of materials. The rest goes to the Department of Teacher Training to cover things like printing the certificates. These are the new rules. We were worried that we might not get enough of the income – that it would have to go to the Ministry but it is working well (Counterpart 1).*

The national coordinator at the Ministry of Education agreed that the system was working well, and added further information:

*If you run the classes during the day, during the working hours, you need to give some money to the Ministry of Education and to the Ministry of Finance. During working hours you need to give about 20% but after working hours you give about 10%. So that's why we try to train them how to manage that correctly. For a project such as this the ELRC must apply to get the money back from the Ministry of Finance ... If you want to use this money, you must justify it. If you don't do that, the money will just go somewhere else (Administrator 2).*

There is some discrepancy in these two accounts as to what happens to 10% of the money but even if, as the national coordinator said, 10% of the income generated

was available on request, the funds available for the ELRC's support role were limited, and the ELRC staff were only now planning to conduct training in a break from classes. An ELRC staff member explained:

*We are hoping to run a training course next year in March. We will focus on the new provinces. That will come out of the 10% [of the money raised through ELRC commercial activities]. We have to put in a proposal. We plan to do it in Khamaouane Province instead of asking teachers to come here. We can get new teachers from Savannakhet, Saysomboune, Borikhamxay and Vientiane Province. It will be a five-day workshop (Counterpart 1).*

In the eighteen months since LEFAP funding had ceased, the ELRC had been able to do little to support the provinces. An ELRC staff member told me, 'We haven't been able to go to the provinces to monitor what's happening since the project finished' (Counterpart 1). Some of the teachers from four of the 'new' provinces had come to the ELRC for an assessment training session paid for by their respective Provincial Education Service. A staff member explained, 'Provinces sent people to come and select tasks and we trained them how to use the assessments. We trained them for one day in how to conduct the assessments – Khamouane and Borikhamxay, Saysomboune and Oudomsay Provinces' (Counterpart 1). However, another staff member lamented the lack of knowledge about the other nine provinces that had begun their programs without the benefit of LEFAP training and assistance. He said, 'There hasn't been any training yet. So we don't know how well they can use these materials. For example, Phongsaly – one of the new provinces – we haven't trained any of their teachers' (Counterpart 2).

Training needs, however, were not confined to teachers in 'new' provinces or even to those who had not previously received training in the focal provinces. Teachers who had attended LEFAP training – particularly those teaching the highest level – also considered that they needed a follow-up program. One such teacher explained:

*I want more training in listening and writing. Level 3 is still quite difficult to teach. Marking writing is difficult for me. I have improved since last time. Compared with the past it's better. I understand the criteria for writing better than [in] the past (Teacher 17).*

An administrator of one of the focal provinces also considered there to be a need for a follow-up program. He said, 'When we implement the courses we still need help to develop the teaching and learning' (Administrator 16). And teachers begged, 'We

*need you or [a counterpart] to visit us to help us with our problems'* (Teacher 17) and *'We need you to visit at least twice a year'* (Teacher 3). Certainly, as I visited each of the venues in this study, I was always asked to assist with some difficulty or another – what to do about specialist vocabulary being a common query. Sometimes I found myself passing on the experiences and solutions of teachers in another venue. What a pity, I reflected, that there is no opportunity for these teachers to come together for support and problem solving sessions.

Eighteen months previously, both the national coordinator and counterparts had considered conducting training for ministry teachers as a way of financing the necessary program support for the provinces. And yet, in the intervening time, there had been none. In our discussions, I suggested to the coordinator that the ministry training units had funds for upgrading their staff and that some had previously expressed their willingness to pay the ELRC for further training. I suggested that maybe the ELRC could advertise their services to them. He contested this strongly:

*The ELRC is not a private company ... If there is an agreement between two ministries there is no problem. But the ELRC cannot advertise like a private school. They cannot fund a private course without getting approval from the Ministry of Education. If some Ministry contacts the ELRC and then the ELRC contacts the MOE, then normally we agree. But we cannot let them do it by themselves – advertise and then just run a course. They haven't sent information to the ministries about this (Administrator 2).*

After further discussion, however, the coordinator conceded that it might be possible. Significantly, his concession was couched in terms of 'helping', rather than 'marketing' and 'advertising', suggesting the possibility that a less stridently capitalist, more cooperative terminology would be more prudent:

*The ELRC can contact different ministries but I think that they can do that informally. Once they have agreed together they can develop a kind of project and then it could be approved by the MOE ... A letter from the MOE to other ministries is not the way of working. It has to be informally. ... We can say informally, 'I can help you. I can train your staff (Administrator 2).*

Apart from sensitive semantics and inter-ministerial protocol, another, very cogent, explanation for the lack of action was the shortage of personnel. The national coordinator's attention was now fully occupied with the administration of a massive ADB education project, leaving him little time to focus on the English for Government Officials program. Two of the former counterparts were also fully occupied on that project. Effectively, the national support role was in the hands of

three permanent ELRC staff and two ex-counterparts who now worked in the Department of Teacher Training within the Ministry of Education.

Although this was a limited number of personnel to undertake such an endeavour, their performance could have been enhanced had the project provided support for their income generating activities. Systems were in place for the handling of the income generated but, although the ELRC had been very successful in generating income through their newly instituted evening classes, the amount generated was clearly insufficient. Had the ELRC made it known they could ‘help’ ministries by disseminating information about their new resources and offering further training for ministry-based teachers, more funding would have been available for monitoring and supporting provincial programs. Had AusAID responded to the softening of political attitudes towards income generation, by mentoring ELRC staff and the national coordinator through this new commercial process, the institutionalisation of the program would have been enhanced. Nevertheless, the reality is that, without on-going support, the ELRC staff’s ability to respond to program needs remains constrained by the shortage of skilled personnel that characterises the Lao public sector.

## **English language needs and the curriculum pathway**

If the ELRC staff had monitored the program, they would have found not only persistent problems in meeting the needs of students, but also that provincial stakeholders now perceived those needs to be more extensive than previously thought. In all locations, my Lao colleague and I found the disjunction between the extent of the curriculum pathway developed by the project and the extent of the needs remained a concern in both the capital city and the provinces. Provincial stakeholders continued to articulate a need for a lower-level course (a pre-course), as did some Vientiane-based providers. In addition, in location after location, ex-students and those studying at the third level of the curriculum voiced their need for a higher level course. In other words, rather than a three-level curriculum, a five-level curriculum was needed. Resources, lack of access to information, and the limited skills of teachers and counterparts would be problematic for the development of both of these levels.

### **Lower-level need**

As shown in Table 8 (page 155), only two provinces were implementing a pre-course to cater for those officials who needed English but had not yet learnt the script

. Luang Prabang, with the assistance of JIKA, reported no problems. Savannahket administrators and teachers, while at the forefront of innovation in their attempts to cater for such students, were finding it very difficult because of a lack of understanding of how to address those needs. Their experience is indicative of potential problems facing others.

On visiting the program in Savannahket I found local stakeholders nearing the end of a trial pre-course at the teacher training college. A teacher explained:

*The students' ... basic knowledge of English is not very good when they come from the rural areas. ... The people who live in Atsapphanthone District, they have five English teachers, so the people have a good opportunity to learn English. But in some other districts it's difficult for them to organise courses. It's very hard for these districts to run the pre-course (Teacher 22).*

An official from the provincial HRD explained how they had attempted to solve this difficulty. His words indicated that the aims of the pre-course were not only to develop the basic English skills which would enable them to access Level 1, but also to broaden their experience of development outside of their district:

*For this course, we brought in seven people from these far districts. We brought them in because we wanted them to experience the town and to make contact with various organisations. We made the Level 1 course longer to help them – we gave them a pre-course (Administrator 16).*

Unfortunately, the trial had not been as successful as hoped for, but the official, being an ex-student of the course, had insights into how to improve the learning outcomes. Following his acquisition of English, he had attended a training course for administrators on Action Research, which he was now putting into practice:

*We are the first province to do a pre-course but we need to make it strong! I've noticed difficulties with people from the districts not having the basic level of English for Level 1. We have monitored this pre-course here and decided on another way. We'll organise a pre-course in three or four districts before sending the officials here. This will be a kind of Action Research (Administrator 16).*

Perhaps the administrator, as an ex-student, had witnessed the same acute embarrassment of officials without the script as I had observed while working on the project (see journal entry, page 79). Evidence points to the biggest constraint to meeting their needs being the skills of the teachers themselves to develop and teach an appropriate 'pre-course'. Firstly, the trial class Savannahket Province was conducting

was mixed-level. Although they had extended the length of the course, this extension was not just for those without basic English language literacy skills. Instead, all students, both those who were ready to access Level 1 and those who needed the ‘pre-course’, were together in one class from the beginning and all received the same four months instruction. The decision about what to include in the ‘pre-course + course’ clearly demonstrated a limited understanding of literacy needs. In fact, English language teachers do not learn how to teach literacy as part of their pre-service teacher training. To address this, the British Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) had recently developed a Lao-specific text, ‘The Alphabet Book’ (Conway, 2002), and had distributed copies to the teacher training schools<sup>26</sup> and teacher training colleges with whom they had been working. Unfortunately, the Savannakhet teachers were unaware of these books. Moreover, when my colleague and I obtained a copy of ‘*The Alphabet Book*’ for the Savannakhet teacher, he was unsure how to use it.

Similar needs were found in Vientiane amongst the three venues which drew students from outside Vientiane city. Of these three venues, the Ministry of National Security had an established ‘pre-course’ before the LEFAP intervention, but the Ministry of National Defence, whose teachers had previously reported difficulties, continued to have no provision for those whose competency was below the starting point of Level 1 of the curriculum. One of their teachers explained, ‘... *many officers they need to study ‘abcd’. They need a pre-course but we don’t do that*’ (Teacher 13). The teachers working on the course conducted by Vientiane Municipality echoed difficulties reported by provincial teachers before project funding finished, with a teacher explaining, ‘*some students come from remote areas of the Municipality and they cannot write the script ... One or two students didn’t have the Latin script. We tried to take them but after one or two months they had to stop. We took them because the HRD sent them*’ (Teacher 19).

Nevertheless, many students do learn the script before accessing the Level 1 course. That some venues were apparently successfully developing the literacy skills of students further emphasises the need for teachers to have opportunities to come together, ideally for formal training, but if this were not possible (given the time

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<sup>26</sup>As well as the five teacher training colleges, the country has 3 teacher training schools where primary school teachers are trained.



constraints of ELRC staff) then to build their understanding by sharing the experiences of the more successful venues.

### Higher-level need

While the need for a pre-course remained primarily a provincial problem, officials in all locations agreed that the three-level curriculum pathway was not extensive enough to fully equip them with the skills they needed. On exiting the final level of the curriculum, many officials were finding they still did not have the competency to adequately undertake the sophisticated English language tasks their work required of them. One current student explained that he was studying English because, *'I need English ... in my field of work, for example: assessing foreign investment applications, writing invitations to diplomats'* (Student: Office of the Governor, Vientiane Province). An ex-student reported that in his province, *'we have many guests come from international organisations, for example JICA and SIDA. I sometimes guide them in the districts and translate for them'* (ex-student Luang Prabang Department of Agriculture and Forestry), while another said he needed English for *'reading and understanding the project reports sent to me'* (Ex-student: Department of Communication, Transport, Posts and Construction, Champasak Province). Moreover, provincial officials' English language skills were vital not only at the local level, but also to enable Laos to effectively fulfil their roles in regional forums. Exemplifying this, an ex-student said, *'This month I went to China where I gave a report to other delegates about Laos and some statistics about agriculture and forestry'* (Ex-student: Luang Prabang Department of Agriculture and Forestry), and an administrator from the same province reported that *'Meetings with our neighbouring countries are often held in Luang Prabang. These are conducted in English. It used to be French. Now it's English'* (Administrator 17).

Whether or not they were working on local projects or in international forums, Government officials saw English as vital for upgrading their knowledge. In one student's opinion:

*English language is vital for searching for knowledge and information from various sources and for the improvement or development of oneself (Student: District Information and Culture Service, Vientiane Province).*

More specifically, a student from a District Department of Planning and Cooperation, stated that he needed English *'for researching information in newspapers, radio and*

TV', while an ex-student, a doctor in a provincial hospital, said '*[I need English for] reading English medical texts books*', and a teachers college director explained:

*I want all teachers here to learn English, not just English teachers, because course books, reference books etc are written in English. Limited English makes [upgrading knowledge] difficult and translating books into Lao is difficult (Administrator 9).*

As well as printed sources, being able to use the internet was also frequently cited as vital for gaining information. An ex-student from a provincial Finance Department, stated, '*I need English for upgrading my knowledge about finances from books and the internet*', and another, from a provincial Office of Land-Use Planning and Development, said, '*I want to know international information from the internet*'. Their needs were succinctly summed up by one of the program administrators who stated, '*People in key roles need English to access information and the internet*' (Administrator 17).

However, the exit level of the course, like the Australian course on which it was based, is approximately ISLPR proficiency level 2 (approximately IELTS 4.5). Learners at this level are described as being able to satisfy 'the requirements of routine situations pertinent to ... linguistically undemanding "vocational" fields' (Wylie & Ingram, 1999). Not surprisingly, having graduated from Level 3 and returned to work, most ex-students in all venues were finding that their English language continued to be inadequate. Of students and ex-students surveyed, 88% of provincial officials and 91% of Vientiane-based officials stated they did not yet have enough English to complete their work responsibilities and access training to their satisfaction. As one student explained, his current level of English did not enable him to '*write reports properly or participate fully in a big conference abroad. I need better listening and I would like to be able to give a presentation*' (Ex-student, Champasak Province). An HRD official commented that '*Lack of English makes it difficult to upgrade the quality of work because staff need to attend workshops for this*' (Administrator 17). To successfully access workshops, graduates considered they needed further study, as articulated by an ex-student who reported that '*Last year I had two weeks training in Vientiane with a German trainer. I understood about 70%. ... I want the opportunity to study Level 4*' (Ex-student Luang Prabang Department of Agriculture and Forestry). An HRD official, himself a graduate of the program, also recognised the limitations, and explained the needs as he saw them:

*In town people need Level 4. At the moment for the far districts, it's enough but in the town we need more. After Level 3 some are directly working with projects and they can do this but they need more vocabulary about their own work. They need to be able to attend conferences and give presentations as well as reading and writing reports (Administrator 16).*

The need in Vientiane was confirmed by an ex-counterpart who, regretfully acknowledging the lack of resources and sufficiently skilled staff, told me, ‘Some people who have finished this course want to continue on to a high level. They come and ask about this. But we don’t have any teachers who can teach this – or materials’ (Counterpart 2). Given the difficulties counterparts experienced in developing the third level of the curriculum because of its language requirements, it is unlikely that, without further project support, they would be able to develop a fourth level. Moreover, given the provincial students’ dissatisfaction with their teachers’ current level of knowledge, without extensive assistance it would also be difficult for such a course to be implemented. Without such support, and without appropriate resources in the Resource Centres, graduates of the three-level curriculum pathway provided by the project continue to be fundamentally constrained in their efforts to contribute to their country’s development.

### **The competency-based approach and cultural expectations**

The final disjunction that had emerged eighteen months previously relates to the transfer of the competency-based approach into a culture in which the values differ from those underpinning the model. My investigations at that time had found an appreciation amongst teachers and students for the competency-based approach because of the understanding of language learning needs and how to address them that the criteria for competency provided. Administrators also appreciated the clarity of the criteria for the insights it gave them into what officials had learned and what they could do with that knowledge once they were back in their workplaces. Teachers preferred the improved teaching and learning conditions that resulted from the competency-based approach to class placement, and there had been indications that the officials themselves preferred not to be in mixed-level classes.

Eighteen months later, 76% of students surveyed indicated that they preferred to study in classes in which students were roughly the same language levels. Like their teachers, students considered that same-level classes improved the teaching and

learning conditions, including a more appropriately paced class. Some comments exemplifying this were:

*It's easier for the teacher to teach and the students to study. We can learn together and learn fast (Champasak Province).*

*Mixed level classes are not good because they're difficult for teachers and students (Vientiane Province).*

*Learning with several levels sometimes leads to difficulties, in particular in speaking and general conversation sessions. It's best if students have the same level (Vientiane Province).*

*If the English comprehension of students is not the same [it's] hard for learning and hard for teaching (Luang Prabang Province).*

*Learning in a class that has same level will get better results. (Luang Prabang Province).*

*I think if students have the same level, the teacher will be comfortable (Savannahket Province).*

*Mixed levels may be a problem because if the teacher goes fast then the ones with low level will be left out. If going slow then it will be boring for the ones with better level (Vientiane Province).*

Nevertheless, the issue of articulation to the next level continued to be provocative. Some teachers in Vientiane claimed, although this was not verified, that students in their venues were not allowed to continue without having achieved the competencies. However, according to an advisor at one of the Vientiane program venues, there is variation in the interpretation of the competency standards:

*As far as I can make out, there is a lot of variation in standards for passing competency tests in different centres ... We have had people enrol in a course [here] bringing with them a Certificate 2 from elsewhere. After testing them again, I have insisted they repeat Level 2 (Consultant 6).*

To some extent, the varying standards are attributable to the LEFAP project timelines precluding on-going professional development in assessment moderation such as was conducted on a regular basis in Australia when the competency-based system was introduced into the Adult Migrant English Program. In order to contribute to such follow-up support, Consultant 6 had tried to secure funding from AusAID for professional development for Vientiane-based teachers. She was highly critical that her submission had been unsuccessful and, in her opinion, '*AusAID's priorities seem to be elsewhere rather than supporting their own initiatives*' (Consultant 6).

Consultant 6 was a long-term resident of Laos with strong local connections. She had effected change slowly and was aware that, as a foreigner, it was easier for her to do this than for a Lao teacher:

*It's taken time and effort to change attitudes ... but now students, teachers and admin have accepted it and can see the benefits. But it's difficult for Lao people to implement a new system without on-going support and no follow-up (Consultant 6).*

As suggested above, a combination of 'foreignness' and cultural sensitivity had enabled Consultant 6 to introduce a 'strictness' into the assessment process at her venue that, as we heard in the previous chapter, Lao stakeholders were diffident about applying.

Reports from some provincial venues suggested a continuing reluctance to adopt the culturally-constructed priorities and values embodied in the competency-based assessment process. The contrast in priorities and values was particularly marked in Luang Prabang where the program was supported by another project. The foreign advisors working on that program were under pressure from the funding body to justify, by its outcomes, the continued inclusion of English as part of the project. In the view of one of these advisors, *'The issue of competency has raised its head in the last few months. It seems difficult for the college to understand the assessment'* (Consultant 8). As a result, instead of the Lao teachers, *'the project will be involved in the next assessment because they want it administered strictly'* (Administrator 11). However, both the Lao administrators and the teachers were keen to discuss the issue further with the project advisors and with me. Their words underscored the centrality of flexibility in the Lao worldview, stemming, as the discussion in Chapter 2 (page 33) suggests, from the Buddhist notion of 'anicca'.

Outlining what he saw as an appropriate course of action, the HRD Director considered, *'We must be flexible sometimes, I would like students to continue until Level 2 and then stop if their English is not strong after that'* (Administrator 17), and a teacher added by way of explanation, *'We have to find a middle way'* (Teacher 24). This proposed modification, which I came to think of as the 'Middle Way Solution', was also viewed as appropriate by the national coordinator. Like Administrator 17, he also considered final level outcomes as having prime importance, telling me that, *'There's some flexibility at the local level. We tell them for the Level 1 and 2 they can deliver for themselves, but for the Level 3, we need to control more closely what they learn'* (Administrator 2). Such thinking had seen the Middle Way Solution adopted in

another province. Unlike Luang Prabang Province, this second province, without project funding, was free to make its own decisions. An administrator reported that:

*We have changed things a little bit. Students move up with peers from Level 1 – if they want to – even if they don't pass. But we also need value for money, so at the end of Level 2 those who don't pass have to leave. We don't let them go to Level 3 if they can't cope (Administrator 7).*

Another explained that this decision took into account a number of factors:

*We cannot always follow the rules. Adult psychology also affects decisions about who will continue. It depends on the situation and on the learner. Also, if they come from the districts sometimes we must let them continue because they have been released from work. They try hard and their friends help them (Administrator 16).*

We heard earlier that the cost of mounting these courses, both financially and in terms of the extended absence from work, had given rise to selection for study being based on a commitment from both the workplace and the student. Like the development assistance agency funding the Luang Prabang project, the provincial administrators needed to see progress in order to continue financing a particular student. However, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter, from the Lao point of view group harmony and 'face-saving' are also important considerations. The 'strictness' of the competency-based assessment sits uncomfortably with such priorities.

Teachers in this province commented that there were times when students had the required competency but, in the words of one teacher, '*They're not allowed to continue because their workplaces want them back*' (Teacher 18). According to another teacher, some officials chose a work-related face-saving way out when they found the course too difficult. The teacher confided that

*Students must be committed to learning and have to attend regularly. If they don't they can't continue so some of the weak ones say they must go to their office often and then they've missed too many classes (Teacher 24).*

Another said, '*Sometimes students know the next level will be too difficult for them and so they say they're too busy at work to continue*' (Teacher 17). This situation had enabled the compromise position – the Middle Way Solution – to evolve. Unless they self-selected out of the program, students who (without their non-scripted colleagues) were of a similar language level would study the first two levels, thus satisfying the collective cultural expectation. After that, work-related reasons – real or fictional –

could be invoked as a reason for non-continuation to the more prestigious final level. Faces would be saved even among those who, having done their competency assessments, were unsuccessful because there were reasons other than ‘failure’ for non-continuation. This modification fundamentally challenges the competency-held approach to assessment as it is manifest in the Western-developed Certificates in Spoken and Written English (Manidis et al., 1992) upon which the Lao curriculum was based. The Middle way Solution pragmatically addresses the financial realities at provincial and national levels. From the Lao point of view, it also reconciled the disjunction between the demands of the competency-based approach and the Lao cultural expectations – a view encapsulated in the national coordinator’s declaration, *‘We need to base the decision on both sides: on the Lao side and on the foreign side’* (Administrator 2).

## **Responding to change**

The Lao stories included in this chapter have depicted the social, political and cultural reality of Lao development eighteen months after the LEFAP project funding ceased. The Lao stakeholders emerge as committed to contributing to their country’s development goals – for which they perceive English to be a key. They emerge as endeavouring to respond flexibly to the changing political reality and the resultant development needs of the decentralisation policy. This contrasts markedly with AusAID’s unresponsiveness as it remained inflexibly focussed on the capital city and unwilling to deviate from the project design. As the first story in this chapter revealed, AusAID’s insistence on its priority focus on the city was ultimately a waste of project resources that left the provinces under-resourced and underskilled for achieving their goal of providing a quality English language program.

AusAID’s failure to respond flexibly compounded its initial failure at the project design stage to adequately assess socio-political reality and, therefore, the ensuing needs. These failures continue to limit the realisation of Lao goals and, ultimately, Lao participation as an equal partner in its own development. Over time, the disjunctions between the project design and reality had become critical, particularly in the provinces where there had been a widening gap between

- the English language needs of government officials and the extent of the curriculum pathway provided
- the staffing requirements and the number of teachers trained

- teacher knowledge and provisions for upgrading.

The disjunction between language needs and the curriculum pathway had resulted in continuing difficulties for some officials in accessing the lowest level of the curriculum. Others, having graduated from the highest level, were finding they needed a higher level course in order to fully participate in the local and regional development tasks required of them. However, the extent of the training, both in terms of numbers and duration, had left teachers with limited capacity to fully address the language requirements of these tasks. While experienced teachers had become more comfortable with teaching the highest level of the course, students perceived their teachers' language and background knowledge to be inadequate. In a nation where teachers have little knowledge of either the outside world or their own country, the provision of little else but the core course materials failed to provide them with access to the knowledge they needed to teach higher-level classes. The lack of appropriate materials for government officials in the Self Access Centres, established under a previous AusAID project, presents a double limitation to students. Not only does it restrict the knowledge their teachers can bring to the classrooms, but it directly restricts the government officials' independent access to the knowledge they need from print or electronic sources. These restrictions on access to knowledge added to those imposed by AusAID's refusal of the Ministry of Education's request for assistance in building the capacity of ELRC staff to generate the necessary income with which to provide a support program.

In contrast, project inattention to building provincial management capacity to fund their projects had proved a minor constraint. Of the five focal provinces, only one had failed to maintain a continuous program, and this would appear to have been a deliberate decision, rather than an absence of management capacity. Nevertheless, there were areas – most pressingly, catering for the English language needs of district-level officials – in which the provision could have been strengthened if administrators had had the opportunity to share experiences. Programs would also have been strengthened, and scarce provincial funds saved, if the project had paid greater attention to the building of understanding amongst administrators of the educational approach being implemented. This would have saved not only funds, but the faces of those whom administrators placed in classes even though they did not have the Latin script. However, time and experience had resulted, at least in some locations, in the



Middle Way Solution that Lao stakeholders perceived as achieving a compromise between funding demands, educational effectiveness and cultural expectations.

It is a solution deeply imbued with Buddhist philosophy, being derived from the Middle Way story of Prince Siddharta's observation of a musician and the pupil he was instructing that to achieve true beauty of sound meant the strings of his instrument should be neither too taut nor too loose. The lesson of this story, that the appropriate path lies in the avoidance of extremes, stands in marked contrast to the rigidity that characterised the implementation of the LEFAP project. The significance of the Middle Way story – to curricula and project appropriateness and ultimately to appropriate development – is elaborated in the next and final chapter.

## Chapter 8: The Middle Way

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### *A snapshot of culture in language*

*As my colleague and I walked through the college grounds, we noticed a sign painted in English on a board and nailed to a tree. It read:*

*It takes a long time to make a good sharp knife.*

*I remarked to my colleague that it had rather sinister connotations. “No”, she laughed, “It’s a proverb. As you know, most Lao people are farmers. A knife is very important to the farmer, and so it must be honed with care and patience. That is how important things should be done”.*

*The proverb was part of a beautification project the college had initiated. The Science and Technology Department had collected twisted pieces of wood and shaped them into the sculptures that now dotted the grounds. Another Department had planted decorative gardens resplendent with variegated leaves of tropical reds, greens and yellows. The translated Lao proverbs were the contribution of the English Department. As we walked, we read:*

*When buffalo fight, the grass suffers.*

*Be patient nine times and wait nine times; you’ll get a piece of gold.*

*Muddy water is stronger than clear water. Calmness is stronger than anger.*

*Ten experts are not worth one experienced person. Ten sons-in-law are not worth one father in-law.*

*My colleague began to recite some of the English proverbs that she knew:*

*A rolling stone gathers no moss.*

*The early bird catches the worm.*

*You’ve got to be in it to win it.*

*A stitch in time saves nine.*

*Time is money.*

*We talked about how the proverbs reflected differences in our cultures – how the English proverbs emphasised punctuality, industriousness and competitiveness, while the Lao ones emphasised calmness, patience, care and respect. My colleague remarked that it was a pity AusAID didn’t know about the good sharp knife. Then she pointed to another proverb:*

*One piece of wood doesn’t make a fence.*

*“They should know about that one too. With only a little bit of development assistance, we are left with something shaky, not something firm and solid”.*

## Appropriateness

This study originated with my concerns about the appropriateness of implementing a competency-based curriculum in a social context far different to that in which it was developed and, that being the case, for the sustainability of the work on which I had been engaged for more than two years. The Lao accounts in the preceding chapters leave no doubt that Lao stakeholders at policy, local and classroom levels are committed to the sustainability of the English for Lao Government Officials program initially implemented under the AusAID-funded LEFAP project. However, while this would appear to mean a fulfilment of AusAID responsibilities, as their accounts also demonstrate the program falls short of being able to fulfil the development goals and priorities of the Lao stakeholders themselves. The program is, to mix the Lao metaphor, a fence with a few posts missing as a result of the project design not being a carefully honed knife.

At the same time as the Lao accounts demonstrate Lao stakeholder commitment to the program, they also illustrate how the educational model on which the program was based causes stakeholders to struggle to reconcile its demands with their cultural values and social expectations. Consequently, as recounted in the previous chapter, once the project had finished, Lao stakeholders attempted to introduce a ‘middle way solution’ that effectively modifies the program in ways that more closely reflects culturally-held expectations of appropriate behaviour.

When the teacher in the final story of the previous chapter spoke worriedly of finding a ‘middle way’ between the Lao view of appropriate assessment and the donor view, he articulated more than a solution to a pedagogical problem. As this final chapter will argue, the Middle Way Solution to this disjunction symbolises both Lao struggles to express cultural identity and the state’s struggle to control its destiny. The Middle Way Solution, being derived from the Buddhist Middle Way story of the musician and his pupil, is imbued with the philosophy that appropriateness lies in the avoidance of extremes. The Middle Way story relates to all three levels of analysis with which this study has been engaged. As well as being invoked in the solution to the culturally problematic competency-based approach to assessment, it also stands in contrast to the inflexibility and, to use Holliday’s (1994) terminology, the ‘hyper-rationality’ of the project design that marred the appropriateness of the project for the Lao socio-political context. In addition, the Middle Way story underpins the glimpse we are afforded of one of the different cultural forms or ‘multiple modernities’

envisaged by Tu Wei-ming (2000) and other scholars (e.g. Escobar, 1995a; Sardar, 1997; Sardar, 1999; Schweder, 2000; Tucker, 1997a; Tucker, 1999) as being more appropriate than the universal modernity espoused by the dominant discourse. Ultimately, the Middle Way story invites donors and development workers, such as myself, to engage reflexively with our own worldview and how our knowledge has been constructed, so that we may re-evaluate the way we unintentionally contribute to the hegemony of the dominant development discourse.

## **The Middle Way and appropriate curriculum**

As we have seen through the responses of Lao administrators, teachers and their students, the English language program for government officials, established with AusAID assistance, was found to have much to recommend it. At an individual level, it was seen as potentially providing access to knowledge necessary for personal and professional development. At the state level, it was perceived as having the potential to address the international communication needs of Lao officials so that they might better represent their country's goals and priorities at regional forums and on local development assistance projects. At the classroom level, the Lao-specific learning materials along with the criteria for competency were acknowledged as leading to much improved learning outcomes. For the Lao students and their teachers, the criteria for competency offered an explicit and accessible guide to teaching and learning. Through the criteria, teachers and students had gained an understanding of how to identify and cater for language learning needs. Moreover, the criteria for competency led to an enhanced teaching and learning environment through the establishment of more homogenous classes than either the teachers or their students had previously experienced.

At the same time, Lao stakeholders continued to find cultural difficulty with what they referred to as the 'strictness' of the competency-based approach to assessment and class placement, i.e. in strictly adhering to the principle of individual achievement of all the competency standards of one level before progressing to the next level. Throughout the project, teachers had related their angst as they struggled with the tensions arising from, on the one hand, their (and their students') perceptions of the benefits of the competency-based approach and, on the other hand, the Lao cultural perception that the maintenance of harmonious group relationships must take priority over the individualism inherent in the educational approach. The Middle Way

Solution had emerged as an attempt to adapt the approach so that it had less potential to undermine group relations by threatening to embarrass individuals with publicly perceived 'failure'. The need to maintain face was all the more acute because of the status of the students, who as senior government officials are automatically deserving of respect in a society in which the notion of karma legitimates one's place in the hierarchy (cf. Chapter 2). The Middle Way Solution thus provides an example of how culturally and politically knowledgeable agents 'filter the method to make it appropriate to local cultural norms, and redefine the cultural norms embedded in the method itself' (Ellis, 1996:213). Essentially, the Lao were redefining the model to reflect the collective values underpinning the wider educational system (cf. Emblem, 1996; Ng Shui Meng, 1991) and the Buddhist-legitimated hierarchy of ethnic Lao society in general.

In this redefinition, students were allowed to move to the second level with their peers if they so chose. At the same time, pragmatic financial considerations also saw the Middle Way Solution pay more attention to the required language competencies at the third and final level of the curriculum. The decision to restrict access to this final curriculum level to those most able to succeed was, as an administrator explained it, based on the need for 'value for money' (cf. page 178), and at first glance would appear to contradict the social ideals embraced at the first two levels of the curriculum. However, analysis of the solution overall, with its attention to respect and maintaining group cohesion, suggests that in this case 'value' encompasses more than financial considerations. In modifying the approach, stakeholders were rejecting the economistic view of society, described by Bourdieu (1998:35) as 'having no other law than that of maximum profit', which underpins the neoliberal economic agenda (cf. Giroux, 2004), and, consequently, the competency-based curriculum model that was developed to serve it. Instead, these politically and culturally knowledgeable agents had devised a 'middle way', taking account of both pragmatic economic considerations and deeply-held cultural considerations, has effectively changed the curriculum model to reflect what constitutes acceptable behaviour. Thus, the Middle Way Solution, achieved in one province and struggled for in another, is an example of how, as Clayton (2000) has argued, ideologies inherent in language and educational models are not 'mindlessly internalised'. Instead, the solution denotes the Lao struggle to 'choose a full, satisfying, valuable and valued way of living' (World Commission on Culture and Development,

1996:15): a way of living that does not necessarily accord with the ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980:133) constructed through the development discourse about what constitutes ‘modernity’ or how the ‘underdeveloped’ can achieve it.

## **The Middle Way and appropriate project design**

As a vehicle for the development discourse, the LEFAP project also served to constrain the cultural freedom of the Lao to articulate their values and development priorities. To enable, rather than proscribe, cultural freedom would require ‘the West ... to transform itself into a learning as well as a teaching civilisation’ (Tu Wei-ming, 2000:264). As we have seen, a lesson to be learned from the Lao middle way response to the competency-based curriculum is that extremes can be avoided through flexibility. This lesson can also be applied to the economism underlying the design of projects (cf. Giroux, 2004; Leach, 1999; Sharp, 1998; Verspoor, 1993). Had flexibility been incorporated into the LEFAP project design, it would have allowed AusAID to respond more appropriately to the accelerated pace of the political changes of decentralisation and income generation by government institutions that occurred during the life of the project.

AusAID’s responses to these political changes are particularly problematic, even in its own terms. AusAID had previously noted that the inability to generate sufficient income was a constraint to the sustainability of an educational change project it had funded in the Philippines (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998). Cambodian English language practitioners on another of its projects had similarly cited it as a constraint (Suos Man & Sok Luong Chan, 2002). The ADB (2000) had recommended attending to income-generating capacity as a specific strategy in the Lao context. While such a focus could, therefore, be viewed as contributing to the economic normalisation agenda (i.e. privatisation) of the dominant development discourse (cf. Chapter 3), the Lao Ministry of Education’s request for assistance in building the capacity of the ELRC to generate income demonstrates that, in this instance, no coercion was involved. Rather, it was a matter of Lao choice. AusAID’s refusal of this request could be seen as indifference to the sustainability of its own initiatives. Certainly, inflexible adherence to the original project design exemplify Leach’s (1999:389) view that the rationalist planning model ‘does not allow for development in the sense of genuine capacity-building to take place’.

AusAID's behaviour towards assisting in the Lao decentralisation process suggests a similar indifference to both fellow donor and Lao agendas. While decentralisation was enthusiastically embraced by some provincial administrators, and other donors moved with alacrity to support it, AusAID adhered to its focus on the capital city. To do otherwise would have required it to acknowledge that its project timeframe and designated outcomes could not address the reality of the English language needs of the Lao government officials and their teachers, and that, with decentralisation, these needs were becoming increasingly more diverse. The result, as this research has shown, is a functioning but fragile English for Government Officials program with improved but restricted access to the language seen by the Lao as essential to their development process.

While the expansion of the program and the Lao commitment to it are measures of the success of the project, its fragility suggests a limited fulfilment of the stated goal of enhancing 'the capacity of the Central ELRC in Vientiane to provide a quality-improved outreach to the regional network of Teacher Training Colleges' (AusAID, 1999b:38). AusAID's inability to respond to changing political circumstances by assisting with the development of income-generation strategies at the ELRC contributed to there having been little post-project support for teachers and their administrators either in the form of direct training or through opportunities to 'share experiences' for the purpose of solving the problems emanating from decentralisation.

The goal of providing a quality-improved outreach to the ELRC's regional network was also limited by AusAID's inadequate appraisal of the resources required in the ELRC's satellite Self Access Centres housed in the provincial colleges. AusAID had previously established these centres to enhance the capacity of government officials to upgrade their English language skills. However, AusAID's failure to support its own previous investment limited the capacity of the teachers to upgrade their skills and knowledge and thus adequately meet the language needs of their students. Furthermore, it directly limited the students' independent acquisition of the specific English they required, not only in their workplaces, but also in order to access training, attend conferences and represent their country in regional forums. Lao stakeholders stressed that the acquisition of English gave people in key roles access to essential information, in books and on the internet, that was otherwise unavailable to them, but which is essential for decision-making and taking charge of their country's

development process. Thus, AusAID's initial failure to adequately assess the situation and its subsequent inflexibility unintentionally perpetuates the unequal power relationships inherent in a hegemonic discourse.

## **The Middle Way and appropriate development**

Unequal power relations between donor and recipient were exemplified in the stifling of Lao agents' attempts to implement the Middle Way Solution in one of the provinces in this study. As described in the previous chapter, in realising the provincial administrators' financial goal of finding another donor to support the English for Government Officials program, the Lao agents in this province then found themselves denied the opportunity to adjust the competency-based approach to fit their perceptions of their own pragmatic and cultural needs, and thus to articulate what is appropriate and valued from the Lao perspective. The opinion of an advisor on that subsequent project that it was difficult for the college to understand the assessment, and the new donor's threatened takeover of the assessment process, exemplify how the development discourse fosters an ethnocentric belief in the efficacy of its own models and how practitioners non-reflexively and inadvertently perpetuate hegemony.

In contrast (and as also described in the previous chapter), the Middle Way Solution to the contradiction between the values underpinning the competency-based approach and Lao cultural expectations had been realised in a province that was free to make its own culturally-informed modifications once the LEFAP project finished. The invocation of the Middle Way, the avoidance of extremes, reflects the social reality of how Lao daily life is imbued with Buddhist philosophy. It can be seen in the decision of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, not long after the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, to integrate religion into its socialism by acknowledging as the state religion what Vistarini (1986) has described as the uniquely Lao symbiosis of Buddhism and animism. It can be seen in the essentially animist ceremony of the *baci* being performed in private homes and government institutions on significant occasions (cf. page 63). It can be seen in the turning away in the mid-1990s from strict adherence to Marxism-Leninism, symbolically represented by the replacement of the hammer and sickle on the national emblem with the sacred Lao-Buddhist monument, *That Luang* (cf. page 61).



The increasing numbers of (north-eastern) Thai nationals paying homage at the monument demonstrates that reverence for That Luang is not confined to those living within Laos, but includes those ethnic Lao across present-day borders. That is to say, it includes those whose ancestors were once part of the pre-colonial socio-political organisation of the ethnic Lao – the Buddhist-legitimated, hierarchically-organised, flexible polity of the *meuang* system (cf. Chapter 2) – which, as Stuart-Fox (1998) has argued, continues to undergird the present Lao state. The present day Lao state remains very conscious of the succeeding waves of cultural hegemony against which it has struggled since the demise of the Lan Xang mandala in the eighteenth century (cf. Chapter 2). This struggle is not only referred to frequently in politically motivated speeches (cf. Appendix 7), but is evidenced in the Lao responses, documented in Chapter 3, to some recent development initiatives, and encapsulated in the cultural symbols on the national emblem (cf. page 61) and in the national slogan ‘Peace Independence, Democracy, Unity and Prosperity’ (cf. page 64). In the context of development, the Middle Way Solution, together with the national emblem, exemplify Ien Ang’s (1998:102) view that

traditional ‘other’ cultures do not absorb ‘Western’ culture passively, but actively indigenize and appropriate, negotiate and sometimes resist its forms and practices, contributing to the creation of a ‘global culture’ which is by no means homogenous, but internally fractured and contradictory.

Listening to the worldview articulated in the ‘Middle Way’ and attempting to learn how it contributes to such a ‘global culture’ would be to accept Perez de Cuellar’s challenge to humanity to ‘promote different paths to development, informed by a recognition of how cultural factors shape the way in which societies conceive their own futures and choose the means to attain those futures’ (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:7). Accepting the challenge requires donors and development practitioners to ‘accommodate a diversity of experiences and rationalities’ (Tucker, 1999:15). It requires a reflexive engagement with one’s own practice: a ‘willingness and courage to understand radical otherness as a necessary step towards self-understanding’ (Tu Wei-ming, 2000:266). Accepting the challenge requires a paradigmatic shift in development thinking so that it is possible to listen to, learn from, and include ‘Other ways of knowing, being and doing’ (Sardar, 1999:60).

## **Appendix 1: Advisory note on Decentralisation Policy (No. 01/PM)**

### **Lao People's Democratic Republic Peace Independence Democracy Unity prosperity**

Prime Minister

No. 01 /PM

**Advisory note of the Prime Minister regarding the policies to building the province to become the strategic unit, the district as budget-planning unit and the village as the implementation unit**

**To: Ministries and equivalent organizations, the provincial governors, the Governor of Vientiane Prefecture and Head of Special Zone**

In the past twenty years of our country's development, the State has been using planning and budgeting as a key strategy for management and adaptation of the development program, mainly by using the planning and budgeting system to transform the Party's policies into guidelines, workplans and budget plans and periodic action plans in order to assure the efficiency of their implementation.

During the previous period, the major part of planning and budgeting has been implemented with some success in continuously developing the socio-economy as initially planned, in connection to industrial and civil service sectors strengthening the structure of agro-forestry economy to grow step by step. The base of socio-cultural sector has also been increasingly concentrated and built up by implementing development plans with clear focus and appropriate budget distribution resulting in improved living condition of the population.

Moreover, the State has paid more attention in building the province to become the strategic unit and the district to become the budget-planning unit. As a result, the provincial and district development has been increasingly extended.

Despite the above-mentioned success in the planning and budgeting activities there are some weak points and failures, mainly because those activities fail to fully reflect the actual situation of socio-economic development in each period. Therefore, goals defined as part of the planning and budgeting activities cannot always be reached, for example, the forces and potential capacity of locals and grassroots have not been sufficiently discovered; the elaboration of guidelines on the Party's socio-economic policies, to the implementing units at district, village and community level accused a lot of delays and are not thoroughly; the management and monitoring of larger economic projects through planning and budgeting has not yet been effective; allocation of management responsibilities to the various levels and assignment of responsibilities for formulation and implementation of planning and budgeting among central, provincial, district and village levels has not been clarified and not definitely identified. These weaknesses have caused insufficiency in gathering the forces from all units for the country's development during the previous period.

In order to dissolve these flaws and to elaborate the Party's guidance which was determined in the resolution of the Sixth and Eighth Conference of the Party Central Committee Management Board (VI Presidency), to take action of the resolution of the Party Central Politics Department no. 21, pursuant the Law on the State Budget and the Prime Minister's Decree no. 192/PM regarding the enactment of the Law on the State Budget,

**THE PRIME MINISTER ISSUES THE FOLLOWING ADVISORY MANDATE:**

**I. Regarding the importance and objectives of building the province to become the strategic unit, the district to become the budget-planning unit and the village to become the implementation unit**

For enactment of the Party's newly adjusted guidance regarding the transformation of socio-economic development plans in line with the market mechanism, under the leadership of the Party and the management of the state, developing the management mechanism of planning and budgeting is a key factor in order to improve the efficiency of the state management mechanism and make it more appropriate for the actual situation of our country.

Building the province to become the strategic unit for the development, the district as the budget-planning unit and the village as the implementing unit is actually an important takeoff of the development planning and budgeting management in our country aiming to achieve the following objectives:

- to extend the scope of rights and increase responsibility awareness at the local levels and the grassroots, in order to help them become aware and utilize their forces and potential capacity for socio-economic development based on the system of self-motivation, self-support and self-building and to reduce their dependency on the central level and to build up and continuously upgrade the capacity of the local levels and the grassroots in administrative management.
- to support the sustainable socio-economic growth of the local levels and grassroots; build up the economic structure of agro-forestry, industrial and service sectors, promote the increase of the production of goods for domestic consumption and exportation widely throughout the country; upgrade the living conditions of civil servants, soldiers and ethnic minorities, and reduce the poverty of the population especially those in rural and remote areas. Moreover, it is also to increase the allocation of responsibility and coordination between the local levels and the neighboring regions, to urge the growth of local development.
- to transmit the Party's policies and state plans to the implementing units at the local level and elaborate the policies into guidelines for the formulation of plans and budgets, starting from the grass-root level, by promoting the population and family units who process the production as well as their services, enabling them to increasingly participate in initiating and implementation of planning and budgeting progress. This will help to adjust the planning and budgeting process so that it can become more adapted to the real situation and enable to discover more forces, potential capacity at the local levels and grassroots.

## **II. Guidance and substance of building the province to become the strategic unit and the district as the budget-planning unit**

### **1 Guidance**

Guidance for building the province to become the strategic unit and the district to be the planning-budgeting unit:

- Prior to implementation of these guidelines, the Resolution of the Party's VI Conference, the 6th and 8th Resolution of the Party Central Committee Administrative Board Conference (VI Presidency), the resolution of the Party Central Politics Department no. 21 and other government regulations must be well perceived in order to adapt the management of the planning and budgeting cycle at the provincial and district level, in accordance with the state laws, and to forbid any local entity or grass-root unit from formulating any of their own regulations which may be in contradiction with the common regulations.
- Building the province to be the strategic unit for the development must be undertaken with regard to the procedures and regulations of state planning and budgeting management, based on the party's resolutions and the implementation of the country socio-economic development plan, and in accordance with the specific development plan for each part of the country, adapted to the features and actual situation of each locality, in order to ensure optimal efficiency in discovering and utilization the resources as well as the potential forces of each locality.
- Building the province to be the strategic unit for the development shall assure the discovery and gathering, as much as possible, of common forces from all economic units and ethnic minorities; and also the utilization of the existing resources to better initiate and adequately and efficiently implement the planning and budgeting process within each locality, and strictly based on the state rules.
- Building the province to be a strategic unit, the district as a planning and budgeting unit and the village as an implementing unit shall be tightly related to the structure of goods production which is relatively connected to the marketing function, and shall also relate to the formation of revenue budgets, made with existing forces and capability, as well as to the task of district capacity building and rural development. This task should be carried out under immediate guiding and responsibility of the Party members of the Prefecture, the Party members of the provinces, special zone, districts and villages.

### **2 Substance**

2.1 Building the province to become a strategic unit for development will enable the Prefecture, or provinces or the special zone to be also the organizations in charge of macro-management at the local level, operating in all fields of work i.e. national defense, security, economic development, and socio-cultural promotion; more specifically, it will enable the province to manage the planning and budgeting process in order to guide and allocate responsibilities to the neighboring provinces and districts under their authority, and to start-up, implement, monitor and periodically

evaluate the planning and budgeting process. As a result, the province will be able to extend its goods production, improve the formulate of economic structures and support the socio-economic sectors for continuous growth, generate sufficient income for self-reliance and for participation in the national expenditures, as determined by laws.

The province's responsibilities regarding the macro-management and its implementation include:

- assure social security and peacefulness within its own locality;
- provide international cooperation within its scope of right and authority as approved by the state;
- strictly follow the regulation , laws and other state policies;
- attempt in implementing strategic plans of national socio-economic development and the state budget planning especially in achieving numeral expectancy of mega-projects, approved by the National Assembly, as well as elaborating it within its authority;
- manage the state's ongoing activities within its locality as part of their responsibility assigned and entrusted by the state;
- maintain and repair historical sites and natural sources and protect the environment within its locality;
- consider, approve and manage small-scale business investment of both interior and foreign private sectors with capital below 1 billion kips (unless special cases), business with unsophisticated techniques and technology and unrelated to national politics matter;
- be responsible for revenue collection and control of budget expenditure as accepted by the National Assembly, strictly follow financial rules as specified in law on the state budgeting and the Prime Minister's Decree no. 192/PM regarding the implementation of the Law on State Budget;
- issue rules to facilitate its control, and make it suitable for the characteristics and culture of its locality, but those rules must not oppose the common laws and regulations set by the state ;
- be responsible for formulation, management, utilization and implementation of policies towards civil servants in the positions under its authority, as specified in laws and regulations on Civil Servant Management.

A province should formulate common plans for its long-term socio-economic development, as well as five-year and annual socio-economic development plans.

For the budget, a province needs to formulate and implement budget planning as part of their responsibilities as specified in the Law on the State Budget and the Prime Minister's Decree no. 192/PM. Moreover, a province must allocate the management and control of production-business units to its districts in order to collect income by dividing its districts into 3 groups: districts obligated to province, self-reliant districts with expenditure on staff salaries and administrative costs, districts with a trade deficit which need to be subsidized by the province. For the districts with a trade deficit, the province needs to assist them in achieving self-reliance by the year 2003-2005.

2.2 Building districts to become the planning and budgeting units is to build sufficient

capacity of a district and enable them to take responsibility in formulating, implementing and evaluating the implementation of its periodic planning and budgeting process with regard to regulations and procedures of planning and budgeting management.

Based on the district's characteristics, advantages of various sources and potential capacity, the district needs to undertake a study and then formulate its own five-year and annual socio-economic development plans. These socio-economic development plans shall be consistent with the guidelines, duties, goals, and investment projects relevant to the district's own functions and within the scope of its responsibility.

The district has responsibility for the formulation and implementation of its budget plan, pursuant to the policy on the allocation of budget management, as specified in the attached table no. 1 and 2 in the Prime Minister's Decree no. 192/PM.

Building the district to become the planning and budgeting unit is closely related to the activities of district grass-root building, rural development and poverty reduction in each district and neighborhood. Moreover, this task is closely related to the formulation and implementation of plans and budget planning in villages and family units, as well as the authorization, assignment of responsibility and distribution of profits to villages.

2.3 Building the village to be the implementing unit is to enable the village to formulate development plans and plans for revenue collection, based on the production plans of each family unit or production groups and service groups, involved in the market economy.

Before formulating a plan, a village needs to start from village data collection and observation of the living conditions of each family within the village and then divide them into different classes, for example, wealthy families, self-sufficient and poor families. Based on the local conditions and local forces, the village will formulate production and service plans aiming at village socio-economic development, assistance to poor families to become self-sufficient and further upgrade those who are already self-sufficient and well-off families, and also oblige them to help the poor families, enabling all these families to jointly raise up the economy, cultural civilization and peacefulness of the village.

To ensure the efficiency of this task, the village is required to have in place an evaluation and monitoring system, to periodically monitor implementation of the plans.

### **III Implementation**

To ensure the enactment of this Advisory Mandate, all the concerned parties are to efficiently carry out their functions and responsibilities, as follows:

1. The State Planning Committee and the Ministry of Finance are to prepare progress description documents and further elaborate this advisory note, and to submit these documents to the Prefecture, all provinces and the special zone, especially regarding its substance and approaches of building the province to become the strategic unit, the

district as the planning and budgeting unit and the village as the implementing unit. In addition, they shall appoint staff to work in the field closely and regularly, by providing advice and supporting the implementation activities in some provinces and districts. Another important factor is to pay attention on training for planning and financial officers in the provinces and districts, in order to upgrade their knowledge and correct understanding.

2. The ministries and equivalent organizations at the central level are to provide technical guidance and to work closely with their field offices at provincial and district levels. Their assistance to the local levels and grassroots should include technical staff, as well as some necessary tools and equipment to strengthen their capacity in implementing their functions.

3. The Prefecture, all the provinces and the special zone should improve their management especially by increasing close supervision and by providing political, ideological and institutional education, assisting the districts to become the planning and budgeting units, promoting production increases and improved revenue collection to strengthen the district and village budgets. The provinces should also support the districts with necessary technical staff and budget.

#### 4. Implementation procedures

- Beginning of June, this Advisory Mandate and other attached technical instructions and guidelines of the State Planning Committee and the Ministry of Finance will be introduced to the Prefecture, all the provinces and the special zone.

- Thereafter, the provinces, in coordination with the technical officers from the central ministries will undertake the fieldwork by introducing this advisory mandate, train the district personnel and undertake experiments in some of the districts, which have the most potential, as an implementing model.

- Undertake an evaluation of this learning experience which is scheduled to take place at the end of the academic year of 1999-2000 and then initiate the implementation.

5. The Ministers, directors of equivalent organizations, the Governor of the Prefecture, provincial governors and the head of the special zone are to acknowledge and strictly take action of this Advisory Mandate and periodically report to the state on the outcome of its implementation.

Vientiane, date: 11 March 2000  
Prime Minister Sisavath Keobounphanh

**Appendix 2a: Ministerial approval for a committee (No. 1594/MOE/96)**

**Lao People's Democratic Republic  
Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity**

Ministry of Education

Ref, No 1594/MoE/96

Minister's Approval

On

Appointment of the Government Official English Language Training Course  
Committee

According to the Laws of the Government of the Lao PDR No 01/95, issued  
March 5,1995,

According to the decree of the Prime Minister on the Organization of the  
Ministry of Education No 61/PM, issued April 10,1993,

According to the Order of the Central Party Committee on Teaching and  
Learning Foreign Languages No 14/CPC, issued October 15, 1996,

According to the proposal of the Personnel and Organization Department,

The Minister of Education has appointed

Article 1: Appointment of the Committee for Government Official for English  
Language Training Course, as follows:

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| 1. Dr Sikhamtat Mitary<br>Director General<br>Vocational and Higher<br>Education Department     | President        |
| 2. Mr Chandy Phommabouth<br>Deputy Director General<br>Teacher Training Department              | Vice President   |
| Mr. Vonekham Phetthavong<br>Deputy Director General<br>Personnel and Organisation<br>Department | Committee member |
| 3. Mr Siri Souvannasi<br>Director of English Department,<br>NUOL                                | Committee member |
| Ms Somdy Sanoubane<br>Director of English Language<br>Resource Centre.                          | Committee member |



4. Mr Somphou Keopannga  
Head of Higher Education Division

Committee member  
and Permanent Secretary

Article 2: Select 2 academic staff to work as counterparts at the Vocational and Higher Education Department.

Article 3: The responsibilities of the Committee are as follows:

1. Plan and propose the budget to serve the activities of teaching and learning English language.
2. Cooperate with the concerned authorities to organize the courses.
3. Provide teachers to deliver the courses.
4. Develop curriculum and materials
5. Seek fund from both domestic and foreign donors to assist the government budget.
6. Cooperate with the Leading Committee for Human Resource Development in implementing the English
7. Language Training Course for Government Officials. Assess, evaluate and report to the minister periodically.

Article 4: The Committee appointed in article 1 has the right to use the budget to implement the courses.

Article 5: The Cabinet Office, Personnel and Organization Department, Finance Department, Vocational and Higher Education Department, Teacher Training Department, NUOL and other concerned authorities to have the right to implement the course under their own responsibilities.

Article 6: This Approval shall enter into force from the date stated below.

Vientiane, December 16, 1996

Minister of education  
Phimmasone Leuangkhamma

Sent to:

Central Party Organization  
Cabinet Office of the Ministry of Education  
Personnel and Organization Department  
Finance Department  
Vocational and Higher Education department  
Teacher Training Department  
National University of Laos,

## **Appendix 2b: Notification re management of overseas assistance (No. 1233/CPMO)**

### **Lao People's Democratic Republic Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity**

Cabinet of the Prime Ministers' Office (CPMO)

No. 2133/CPMO

#### **Notification**

**To:** All ministries, equivalent committees, all provinces, municipality, and the special zone

**Subject:** Appointing the Ministry of Education (MoE) to take charge of managing an overseas assistance in teaching English to the Lao government officials not participating in ASEAN work

- Following the letter from the Prime Ministers Office, No. 1174/CPMO, dated 15/8/1997 concerning the ongoing discussion between the MoE, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoF), the Prime Ministers Office (PMO) in terms of who will be in charge of managing this assistance:

- Following the letter from the PMO, No. 1564/CPMO dated 16/9/1997 in appointing the MoE and the MoF to discuss the concerned matter in more details

CPMO has the honour to inform that in implementing the economic open door policy with foreign countries, learning English has become one of the most priority issues in human resource development for the Lao government officials. Demand in learning English has increased nowadays. As well, the number of overseas teachers has grown.

In implementing the degree by the Central Politburo Party, No. 14/96, dated 15/10/96 which stated that MoF is responsible for requesting the assistance from overseas in organizing English training course for the main personnel, the officers working related with foreigners, and the government officials participating in ASEAN work.

For this reason, MoE is appointed to take charge of managing the overseas assistance in teaching English to the government officials in order to manipulate this assistance effectively. Also, MoE, MoF, Investment and Foreign Cooperation Committees are assigned to discuss more practical details, especially the regulations, the procedures of cooperation and acceptance of the assistance as well as sharing the responsibility for each section.

Therefore, CPMO honourably informs all ministries, provinces, the municipality, and the special zone for acknowledgment and giving cooperation in implementing this subject.

Vientiane, 21/11/97  
Vice Minister of CPMO  
Cheuang Sombounkhan

## **Appendix 2c: Notification re Government officials upgrading program (No. 140/CPC)**

**Lao People's Democratic Republic  
Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity**

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Lao People's Revolutionary Party  
Central Party Committee

No 140/CPC

### **Notification**

To: Minister of Education

Subject: The implementation of the government officials' educational  
upgrading program and English language training

According to government officials' work plan for the year 1996-1997 from the  
Central Politburo Party, No 17 dated on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1997,

According to the discussion at the technical meeting at the Central Party Committee  
Bureau on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1997, attended by representatives from the Central Party  
Propaganda Committee, National Organisation for the Studies of Policy and  
Administration, Non-Formal Education Department at the Ministry of Education,  
Personnel Department at the Central Party Committee,

The Central Party Committee honourably inform a plan for the government official  
educational upgrading program and English language training for academic year  
1996-1997 as follows:

1. The government official educational upgrading program for the line-ministries  
is to start the first course in July 1997 with 50 participants. This program  
includes lower and upper secondary school levels as stated in item 1.6 in the  
government official work plan.

The Central Party Committee in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and  
related organizations have responsibility for nominating key personnel from the line-  
ministries for attending the educational upgrading program. The Ministry of  
Education together with the Central Party Committee and concerned organizations are  
also in charge of conducting, managing and monitoring courses, including curriculum,  
teachers, learning facilities and other services.

2. Educational upgrading program and English language training are for government officials in the line-ministries, other organizations and at the grass roots level targeting officials who are under 50 years old and have not completed lower and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education is requested to run courses and design curriculum. For English language training programs, the Central Party Committee advises each training centre in the line-ministries to run foreign language training. For the ministries that do not have a training centre, it is advised to coordinate with the Ministry of Education to conduct a course for government officials at their workplace.
3. A proposed curriculum for the educational upgrading program from the Ministry of Education will be implemented. This program consists of two courses: a 9-month intensive course and a 12-month general course. It is also advised that the proposed curriculum for English language training from the Ministry of Education will be used. Introduction to curriculum, course monitoring and assessment' will be included. Course participants will be given a certificate upon the course completion.
4. The implementation of the educational upgrading program and the English language training are in item 111.3 in the government officials' work plan for the year 1996-1997, No 17/PPCC, dated on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1997. Therefore, this document informs for acknowledgement and cooperation in implementing the programs successfully and effectively.

Vientiane, date 27 March, 1997  
On behalf of Central Party Committee  
Resident Officer  
Bounthong Chitmany

## **Appendix 2d: Roles and responsibilities (No. 3279/MFA)**

### **Lao People Democratic Republic Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity**

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

No 3279/MFA

**To** All Ministries, Equivalent Committees, all Provinces, the Municipality and the Special Zone

**Subject** The implementation of the notification of the Prime Minister's Office appointing to the Ministry of Education the responsibility and management in foreign assistance in terms of English teaching for Government Officials, not participating in ASEAN work.

According to the notification of the Prime Minister's Office, issue No 2133/PMO dated 21/11/97, concerned the issued mentioned above, the Prime Minister has appointed Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education and Committee of Planning and Cooperation, and Foreign Economic Cooperation to discuss the matter.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs honourably informs that in order to implement the notification, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Committee of Planning and Cooperation and Foreign Economic Cooperation has discussed this issue on the 28/11/97 to share the responsibilities, as follows:

#### **1. Ministry of Education**

Responsible for central management of foreign assistance in terms of English Teaching for Government Officials, not participating in ASEAN work. Any requests for teachers are to go through Ministry of Education.

Discussion or any documents assisting in English teaching from any government office are directed to the related organization through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Propose for entry visa, multiple entry visa, visa extension, identity extension for

approved English teachers or staff from any related organizations who come to assist in English teaching.

2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Responsible for contacting for foreign assistance by sending any related documents, received from the Ministry of Education to the related organizations.

Propose experts' names or volunteers' names, proposed from the related organizations to teach English to the Committee of Planning and Cooperation, and Foreign Economic Cooperation in order to get approval from the government.

Giving entry visa, multiple entry visa, visa extension, identity extension for teachers, permitted to enter in order to teach English or for any staff from related organization including both the assisting organizations and the organizations which come to observe the English teaching.

3. Cooperation investments and the Committee of Planning and Cooperation.

Propose the experts' names or volunteers' names approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the government.

Sending the approval notification to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for implementation.

4. All ministries, the Equivalent Committees, Provinces, Municipality and Special Zone

Responsible for English upgrading plan for the staff by proposing plan with the related organizations or preparing any documents then propose them to the Ministry of Education.

Manage the experts or volunteers who are under their responsibility, proposing entry visa, multiple entry visa, visa extension, asking for and extending identity for those permitted to enter, or asking for visa for the staff of the related organization from the Ministry of Education.

Conduct reports, evaluate strong and weak points every six months and in a yearly in

order to correlate with the external assistance regulation, then give the report to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Committee.

After the implementation, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Committee of Planning and Cooperation will discuss and evaluate the implementation in order to manage the English teachers and assistance.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs honourably informs the result of the meeting and the notification No 2133/ Prime Minister's office, dated 21/11/97 for implementation.

Vientiane, 5/12/97  
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Somsavath Lengsavath



## Appendix 3: Student survey for curriculum development

### Government Officials English Language Learning Needs Survey

The Lao Australia English for ASEAN Purposes (LEFAP) Project is an AusAID-funded project in cooperation with the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. The project will develop curriculum and materials to assist government officials to learn the English necessary for their work. The purpose of this survey is to find out what English you need for your work. Please answer the following questions so that the curriculum and materials we develop will be as relevant as possible. Thank you for your cooperation.

#### Section 1: Background information

1. Position
2. Ministry / Department
3. Responsibilities:
4. What languages do you speak?
5. What languages do you read/write?
6. What level of English are you studying now?
7. Are you involved now / or do you expect to be involved in the future with  
ASEAN-related work? Yes / No
8. Do you use English in your work now? Yes / No
9. Do you expect to need English for your work in the future? Yes / No
10. What specific difficulties do you experience at work due to lack of English?
11. How important for your work are each of the following skills in English?

Speaking:	<i>very important</i>	<i>fairly important</i>	<i>not important</i>
Listening:	<i>very important</i>	<i>fairly important</i>	<i>not important</i>
Reading:	<i>very important</i>	<i>fairly important</i>	<i>not important</i>
Writing:	<i>very important</i>	<i>fairly important</i>	<i>not important</i>

**Section 2: Work-related topics**

In your work do you need to be able to talk about the topics below in English? Do you need to read about them in English (e.g. reports) and /or write about them in English?

Please tick (✓) the relevant topics and skills.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>talk</b>	<b>read</b>	<b>write</b>
Your province	_____	_____	_____
Other provinces	_____	_____	_____
Laos	_____	_____	_____
Other countries	_____	_____	_____
Governance	_____	_____	_____
Law	_____	_____	_____
Development cooperation projects	_____	_____	_____
Trade	_____	_____	_____
Investment and finance	_____	_____	_____
Industrial development	_____	_____	_____
Agriculture	_____	_____	_____
Forestry	_____	_____	_____
Mining	_____	_____	_____
Transport and communication	_____	_____	_____
Tourism	_____	_____	_____
Science and technology	_____	_____	_____
National security	_____	_____	_____
The environment	_____	_____	_____
Culture	_____	_____	_____
Education	_____	_____	_____
Human resource development	_____	_____	_____
Health	_____	_____	_____
Drugs and narcotics control	_____	_____	_____
Natural disasters e.g. floods, drought	_____	_____	_____
Current events	_____	_____	_____

What other topics do you need to talk, read and / or write about for work purposes?

Please list the 5 *most important* topics for you:

i

ii

iii

iv

v

Do you need to socialise with foreigners for work purposes?

Yes / No

If yes,

- Where do you do this socialising? (e.g. at restaurants)

- What do you need to do in English on these occasions? (e.g. explain Lao food)

### Section 3: Work-related tasks

1. How important is it for you to do the following things in English? For each write:

1. for *very important*
  2. for *fairly important*
  3. for *not important*
- OR**

Discuss work responsibilities and schedules

Organise trips for delegations going abroad

Organise trips for visiting foreign delegations

Welcome delegations / visitors

Host delegations

Socialise with foreigners

Attend conferences

Attend meetings

Travel abroad

Telephone foreign representative offices

Make appointments

Give speeches

Read letters and faxes

Read minutes of meetings

Read agendas for meetings

Read reports

Write agendas for meetings

Write letters and faxes

Read statistics

Read newspapers

Read contracts

Write reports

Write summaries of documents

Other (please specify)

#### Appendix 4a: Course competencies

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Speaking and Listening	Speaking and Listening	Speaking and Listening
<p>Can follow common classroom instructions.</p> <p>Can use strategies to assist understanding.</p> <p>Can use common social phrases.</p> <p>Can <i>answer</i> simple questions about personal details, routine work and personal activities and about work and personal plans</p> <p>Can <i>ask</i> simple questions about personal details, routine work and personal activities and about work and personal plans.</p> <p>Can understand relevant factual information in short simple sentences.</p>	<p>Can participate in short conversations.</p> <p>Can use strategies to assist understanding, e.g. asking for something to be repeated, said more slowly or asking for the meaning of a word.</p> <p>Can give factual information.</p> <p>Can give spoken instructions / directions.</p> <p>Can make arrangements for a meeting.</p> <p>Can follow spoken instructions / directions.</p> <p>Can understand main points of spoken factual information.</p>	<p>Can participate in short conversations.</p> <p>Can understand short oral presentations.</p>
Reading and Writing	Reading and Writing	Reading and Writing
<p>Can read personal information, e.g. name card, passport details.</p> <p>Can read short texts giving factual information / descriptions / recounts / comparisons.</p> <p>Can write short texts giving factual information / descriptions / recounts / comparisons.</p>	<p>Can read and follow a series of written instructions / directions.</p> <p>Can read short texts giving factual information.</p> <p>Can write short texts giving factual information.</p> <p>Can fill in a form giving personal information.</p> <p>Can read routine work documents.</p>	<p>Can read factual information texts.</p> <p>Can write factual information texts.</p> <p>Can read and describe graphs and charts.</p> <p>Can read work-related documents.</p> <p>Can write work-related documents.</p>

## Appendix 4b: Assessment guide: Level 2

<b>Competency 1:</b>	<b>Can use strategies to assist learning and communication</b> <b>e.g.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- asking for something to be repeated or clarified if he/she has not understood or not heard</li> <li>- asking for the meaning of a word or phrase</li> <li>- saying something in a different way if he/she has not been understood</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student uses appropriate question forms</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses appropriate vocabulary</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student's meaning is understandable even though there may be errors in grammar or pronunciation</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>Teacher observes student saying/doing these things during an interview or during a listening task</i>

<b>Competency 2:</b>	<b>Can use a range of resources for learning English</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student participates in group-work and other interactive activities in the classroom</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses resources outside of the classroom e.g. Self Access Centre</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student completes assignments</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>Observation by teacher during the course</i>

<b>Competency 3:</b>	<b>Can participate in casual conversations</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student uses appropriate expressions for beginning and ending a conversation</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses strategies for keeping a conversation going e.g. making appropriate responses to show interest</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses appropriate vocabulary for the topic</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses grammatical structures to ask and answer questions</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student's meaning is understandable even though there may be errors in grammar or pronunciation</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>Short interview with teacher</i>

<b>Competency 4:</b>	<b>Can give spoken instructions / directions</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student gives a series of at least 5 instructions / directions in the correct order</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student repeats or clarifies as requested</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses the imperative form, plus prepositions of place as necessary</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student's meaning is understandable even though there may be errors in grammar or pronunciation</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>Giving directions to a location so that another person can follow them on a map or Giving instructions on how to use office equipment (e.g. a photocopier) – with a series of pictures as prompts</i>

<b>Competency 5:</b>	<b>Can follow spoken instructions / directions</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student follows a series of at least 6 instructions / directions</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student follows the instructions/directions in the correct sequence</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student shows he/she understands location (e.g. on the left) and prepositions of place</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<p><i>Following a series of instructions given by the teacher and writes or draws on paper according to the instruction</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>or</i></p> <p><i>Listening to directions while following on a street map and marking destination</i></p> <p>- <i>Teacher may say the instructions twice if the student asks or if the teacher considers it necessary.</i></p>

<b>Competency 6:</b>	<b>Can orally make arrangements for a work/ social meeting</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student uses dates and times appropriately</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student asks for information about times, dates and places</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student gives information about times, dates and places</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Confirms, checks or clarifies information as necessary</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student's meaning is understandable even though there may be errors in grammar or pronunciation</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>Role-playing arranging a work or social meeting</i>

<b>Competency 7:</b>	<b>Can orally give information in short simple sentences</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student gives at least 5 pieces of information about a topic</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses vocabulary appropriately</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Students repeats or clarifies if necessary</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student's meaning is understandable even though there may be errors in grammar or pronunciation</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>Interview with teacher</i>

<b>Competency 8:</b>	<b>Can understand main points of spoken factual information</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student shows understanding of at least 6 out of about 8 pieces of information (i.e. correctly answers 6 questions)</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student shows understanding of key vocabulary</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<p><i>Teacher reads a short text (twice if necessary) and student either:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>numbers pictures in the order that he/she hears them, or</i></li> <li>- <i>writes <u>short</u> answers to questions about the text</i></li> </ul>

<b>Competency 9:</b>	<b>Can read and follow a series of written instructions</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<i>Student can follow a series of 8 written instructions or directions</i>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>Following instructions to complete a task, e.g. using a computer or following directions on a map</i>

<b>Competency 10:</b>	<b>Can fill in a simple form giving personal information</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student writes information in correct places</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses ticks, circles etc as required</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student's meaning is understandable although there may be a few spelling errors</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<p><i>Completing a relevant form e.g. immigration form, hotel registration form, scholarship application form</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Form with approximately 15 pieces of information to complete</i></li> </ul>

<b>Competency 11:</b>	<b>Can read routine work documents</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student answers questions about clearly stated information</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student shows he/she understands specific vocabulary</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student shows he/she understands ways of addressing people, e.g. Ms, Mr, Dear sir,</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student answers all questions about the document correctly</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>In 20 minutes, reading a document and writing short answers to questions about the document.</i>

<b>Competency 12:</b>	<b>Can read factual information texts, e.g. a paragraph from a report about Laos, a short newspaper article, a brochure</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<p><i>Student answers questions about explicitly stated information</i></p> <p><i>Student understands main ideas of the text</i></p> <p><i>Student understands specific vocabulary</i></p> <p><i>Student answers all questions about the text correctly</i></p>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<i>In 30 minutes, reading a text of approximately 200 – 250 words and writing <u>short</u> answers to questions about the text</i>

<b>Competency 13:</b>	<b>Can write short texts giving basic personal and factual information and / or descriptions</b>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Student writes about the correct topic</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student writes at least one paragraph</i></li> <li>- <i>Student uses appropriate introductory sentence(s)</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses capital letters and punctuation as required</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses at least 3 different conjunctions</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student uses appropriate tenses</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Student's meaning is understandable although there may be a few errors in grammar or spelling</i></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment task</b>	<p><i>In 30 minutes, writing approximately 100 words about a given topic</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Student may use a dictionary or a vocabulary list</i></li> <li>- <i>Student may redraft within the time limit</i></li> </ul>



## Appendix 4c: Relationship of competencies to learning

### Level 2: Unit 6: Development Assistance

Competencies	Language tasks	Grammar & text structure	Language examples
Can participate in a short semi-formal conversation - using strategies for showing interest and for checking comprehension	Discussing the last agenda item and adding more information Checking facts and information Making appropriate responses Adding information	Comparative & superlative adjectives  Rising intonation	The districts in the north are the poorest  Really? Oh! /Mmm /That's interesting!
Can understand main points of spoken factual information.	Talking about regions in Laos  Listening to information about development assistance	a/an	Sayaboury is an important cotton-growing region in Laos  Names and abbreviations of development assistance organisations
Can read short texts giving factual information	Reading short report about development	Future with "will"	In the year 2000, Sayaboury will build the Namtien irrigation system.
Can orally give relevant factual information using short simple sentences	Talking about development, development assistance and giving reasons		In your province, do you have a project to ...? / Who with?
Can write short texts giving factual information	Writing about development in another province		Development assistance, assist, improve, grow, build, provide, export, project, training, cotton, irrigation system, non-formal education, primary school, secondary school, government, region, northern, southern, eastern, western, agriculture, agricultural products

## Appendix 5: Stage 1 Interview guides

### Interview guide: Administrators

Name:

Date

Position and workplace:

Background information on the introduction of the English for Government Officials courses in your province or ministry (*how, when start, why, what before*)

Personal role in the English for Government Officials courses? (*e.g selection*)

How easy or difficult has it been to carry out your role? Why?

(If there were courses before the project) how is what you do different to how things were done before?

How do you think people feel about these courses?

What do you understand by a competency-based approach?

In your opinion how useful / appropriate / effective is a competency-based approach in the Lao context?

What are the plans for future English courses for government officials?

What needs to happen to ensure the sustainability of the program?

Additional comments?

## **Interview Guide: Teachers**

Name:

Date

Position and workplace:

Background information on self and involvement with government officials courses.

*(length of time, levels taught)*

Background information on the introduction of the English for Government Officials courses at workplace *(how, when, why, what before)*

How do you think people feel about these courses?

How are the courses different to other courses? *(in the classroom, in assessment, in selection, student satisfaction, outcomes, competency-based )*

How do you think people feel about the changes to the way things are done?  
*(administrators, students, teachers)*

In your opinion how useful / appropriate / effective is a competency-based approach in the Lao context? *(teaching, assessment, articulation)*

What has been difficult about introducing the courses?

How have you been helped to implement the courses? (*selection, support, training, student attitude*)

What do you think will happen after the project finishes?

What needs to happen to ensure the sustainability of the program?

Anything else to add?

## Appendix 6: Stage 2 Student survey and interview guide

Workplace:

Position:

1. What work responsibilities do you need English for?
2. Do you travel abroad for your work (now or in the future)? Yes / No
3. Do you need English for attending workshops, conferences or for further study (now or in the future)? Yes / No
4. Do you have enough English to do the things in questions 1, 2 & 3? Yes / No
5. For what other purposes do you use English?
6. Who paid for you to study the English for Government Officials course?
7. Do you think the competency-based approach is useful? Why? / Why not?
8. In your opinion, is it better to learn in classes where students have the same level or in mixed-level classes? Please explain why.
9. Are / were the students in your class approximately the same level? Yes / No
10. Sometimes English teachers do not have much knowledge of the work of government officials. Do you think this is a problem? Why / Why not?
11. Did your teacher(s) have enough general knowledge (e.g. of Laos) to teach the course well? Please explain your answer.

## Appendix 7: *Vientiane Times* article

### Vientiane celebrates Constitution Day

A thousand people in Vientiane joined leading party and state officials in central Vientiane yesterday to commemorate Constitution Day, the 15 th anniversary of the historic occasion of the National Assembly announcing that the state was to be governed by law.



Mr Thongsing (centre) attending the Constitution Day ceremony with Mr Bouasone (on his left) and Mr Sombat (on his right).

President of the National Assembly, Mr Thongsing Thammavong, Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh and Vientiane capital Party Secretary, Mr Sombat Yialiher also participated in the solemn ceremony at the National Culture Hall in Vientiane. The hall was decorated with national and party flags above the slogan to celebrate the day.

*Speaking in front of the crowded hall, Mr Sombat gave a long speech, recollecting the history of the nation, the people's fierce struggle for national independence since the 18 th century, and the wise leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party finally freeing the country from foreign oppression in 1975.*

The party adapted itself to a new world order with the introduction of the renovation policy, which resulted in establishment of the first constitution on August 15, 1991. "The promulgation of the constitution is one outstanding result of the renovation policy of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party," said Mr Sombat. "It was a milestone decision, to run the country under the rule of law. In addition, it reflects the character, reality and growth of our people's democratic regime." He said that the constitution, which was the mother of all laws in the nation, has been creating the conditions for all Lao citizens to enjoy the rights of national ownership and self-determination enshrined therein. The nation's laws are considered tools to protect the rights and obligations of the people, to enhance democratic privileges, social order and to secure the authority of Laos in the international arena, he explained. He also said that the introduction of the constitution was to create a unified national spirit, improving solidarity among multi-ethnic groups in the country. He explained that this was an important and necessary precondition for the task of protecting national sovereignty, and the continuation of the development of the people's democratic regime.

Since the promulgation of the constitution 15 years ago, Mr Sombat said that the laws provided effective governance and saw people receive just treatment. The outstanding result, he said was due to the authorities focused to advocate the constitution and law among state officials, police, military as well as all ordinary people. Over 60 laws pertaining to many sectors of society have been established in accordance with the inspiration of the constitution, according to Mr Sombat. He said that the laws met the demands of new development in accordance with the market oriented economy under the leadership of the Party and socialist theory.

With the help of the constitution, the party can define its leadership role, the executive responsibilities of the government and of the mass organisations. The constitution also clearly states the relationship between the legislative body and the executive and judiciary bodies, according to Mr Sombat.

**By Ekaphone Phouthonesy**  
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