

Bachelor Thesis

**The perception and organization of English Education – Factors  
that lead to unequal English proficiency from a Laotian  
perspective**

Bachelor of Education

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## Table of contents

Introduction .....	1
1. World English(es): Roles of English(es) in Asia.....	2
1.1. The Current Situation of English Language Education in Laos.....	2
1.2. English(es) in the Laotian context– Kachruvian Three Concentric Circle Model .....	3
1.3. Understanding World English(es) as Lingua Franca (ELF) in Asia.....	6
1.4. Glocal English: The Status of Foreign Language Teaching in Laos .....	7
2. Geographic and Historic Knowledge about Lao People’s Democratic Republic .....	8
2.1. Geography and Demography .....	9
2.2. Socio-Economic Background .....	10
2.3. Historic Educational Background .....	11
3. The Current Education System and English Education .....	13
3.1. The Education System .....	13
3.2. Teaching and Learning Conditions .....	16
3.2.1. Teachers Preparedness .....	18
3.2.2. Teacher Performance and Challenges.....	19
3.2.3. The Role of the Students.....	21
3.3. The Political Factor .....	23
4. English Language Teaching in Southeast Asia Using the Example of the Philippines .....	25
4.1. From American Colonial Rule to Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education .....	25
4.2. Comparison of Laotian and Filipino English Language Teaching .....	27
5. Résumé and Future Goals – Understanding Contextual Surroundings.....	30
5.1. Extrinsic Factors .....	30
5.2. Intrinsic Factors .....	31
5.3. Closing Remarks .....	32
References.....	33
Statement of Authorship.....	40

## Introduction

This thesis deals with the perception and organization of English education and factors that lead to unequal English proficiency from a Laotian perspective. After spending half a year in Laos and teaching English under the given circumstances, it became apparent that there is insufficient English proficiency in Laos. The question which factors are leading to unequal proficiency arose. In addition, what is Laotian English education still lacking compared to other Asian countries? The purpose of the thesis is to understand prevailing contextual surroundings in Laos more holistically and in detail and to elicit reasons.

The thesis can be split into four main parts: English(es) in Asia, country overview about Laos, the current education system and English Language Teaching and last but not least a comparison of English Language Teaching of another East Asian country. Here, the example of the Philippines is used.

Firstly, the matter will be approached in defining roles of English(es) in Asia, followed by theoretical concepts to assign and evaluate English levels and why the role of English as Lingua Franca has to be underlined in an Asian context. Secondly, Chapter 2 will give an overview of Laos and its population, infrastructure, socio-economic situation and a general historic educational background. The chapter provides basic information that are necessary to make connections during the further procedure.

Thirdly, the main part provides an inside into the education system and its construction. Teaching and learning conditions will be investigated and it will be explained how it is possible to become a teacher in Laos. Furthermore, the quality of teacher training and teacher performance will be reviewed. The role of the teacher, student and politics are to be analyzed and help on the matter what factors lead to unequal English proficiency. Throughout, the thesis it should become clearer how strong the influence of contextual surroundings on not only Lao peoples' English proficiency but English education in general is.

The thesis closes with the aforementioned comparison to the Philippines, which depicts an English Language Teaching paradigm that Laos could refer to in order to further develop its own English Education system. It is to be concluded with a résumé of all factors affecting English proficiency in Laos that came to light during the examination and recommendations will be given on how to target issues of English education in Laos.

# 1. World English(es): Roles of English(es) in Asia

Before Laos and its education system and English language teaching shall be the center of this thesis, it is to begin with the definition of categories that describe English usage and acquisition. To define roles of English(es) in Asia, variations of English(es) are examined, and possible threats embodied through linguistic imperialism illuminated, followed by an introduction to Kachruvian studies from the 1980s and English as a Lingua Franca, a current approach researched since the 1990s. As a last point, a description of the current status of foreign language teaching in Laos is given and its importance reasoned through a globalized world.

## 1.1. The Current Situation of English Language Education in Laos

There are different models that differentiate between English levels and different English(es). The term *World English(es)* or abbreviated WE describes different views on the English language spread around the globe. Approaches to the field of *World English(es)* date back to the 1960s. The application of the term can take place in a narrow sense referring to schools and in a broader sense referring to all approaches that deal with WE studies (cf. Bolton 2012, 14). In order to evaluate English education in Laos, it is necessary to categorize English(es). Tom McArthur's *Circle of World English* presents different

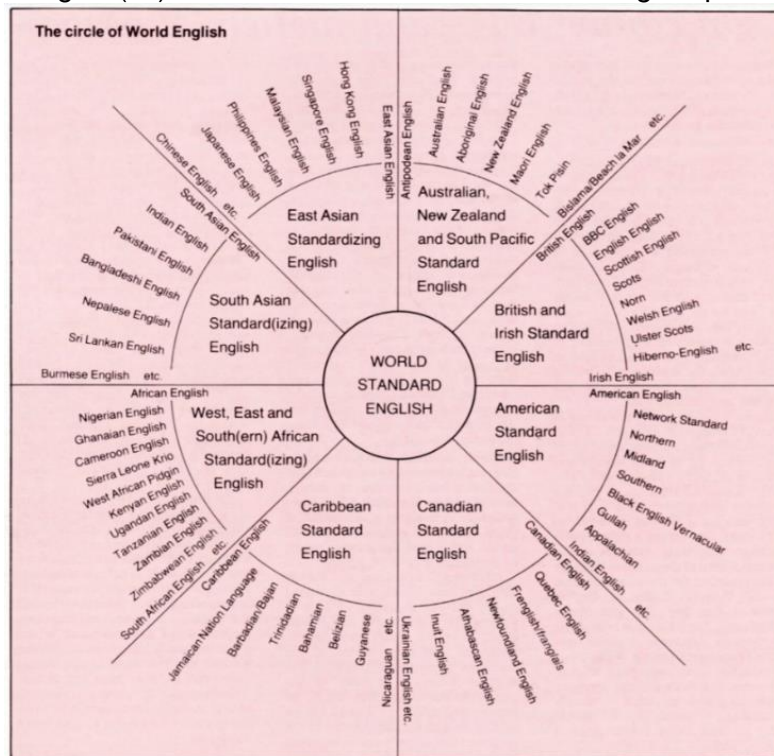


Figure 1 - World Standard English (McArthur 1987, 11).

English(es) and classifies them (See figure 1). Figure 1 is about **World Standard English(es)** and visually puts all its varieties into the form of a sun. Its rays are different Standard English(es). South Asian and East Asian Standardizing English are to be looked at. Laotian English apparently is not classified or seen as World Standard English. It may be due to the size of Laos, the number of English speakers in Laos and lastly because the source is from 1987. If Laos had to be placed in this illustration, it would have to be placed between South and East Asian Standardizing English from a geography-based point of view. The next models being put into the spotlight deal with the assessment of English levels.

## 1.2. English(es) in the Laotian context– Kachruvian Three Concentric Circle Model

The Kachruvian studies on World English(es) build on the differentiation between English as a Native language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (cf. Bolton 2012, 13). As from 1985 Braj Kachru's *Three Concentric Circles Model of English Language* has been considered as one of the most influential and debated models to classify the expansion of English worldwide (cf. Schmitz 2014, 375). This geography-based model consists of the inner circle, outer circle and the expanding circle, all placed concentrically (see figure 2) (cf. Murata and Jenkins 2009, 5).

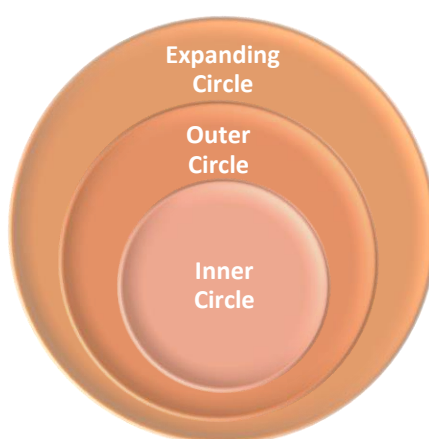


Figure 2 - own illustration (cf. Yano 2009, 212-213).

The center of the **Kachruvian Three Concentric Circle Model**, the inner circle, represents countries, in which English is natively spoken (ENL) for example USA, Australia, United Kingdom and New Zealand (cf. Schmitz 2014, 375). These countries are norm-providing for the spread of English language and have a base of 380 million people (cf. Valpa 2020). This circle is surrounded by the outer circle countries. Malaysia, Philippines, and India are

examples (cf. Schmitz 2014, 375). The number of English speakers in the outer circle is around 300 million people (cf. Valpa 2020). Here, English is learned as a second language (ESL) and used functionally. The last concentric circle, the expanding circle, includes countries such as Thailand, China, Indonesia and South Arabia, in which English is being used as a foreign language (EFL) (cf. Yano 2009, 214-215). After this model Laos would be assigned to the expanding circle and contributes its people to estimated one billion English speakers (cf. Valpa 2020).

Nowadays, linguists are of the opinion that the *Kachruvian Three Concentric Circle Model* is superseded. The basis of this model is taken, rebutted, and being transferred into expanded models. Yasukata Yano examined Braj Kachru's Model and raised the question about the definition of a native speaker of the English language, who may hence be part of the inner circle (cf. Yano 2009, 213). From Kachru's view it must be speakers from countries, in which English is the official language and where English is acquired as mother tongue, such as USA, Great Britain, Canada and Australia. Yet Yano observes that becoming a native speaker is not necessarily intertwined to geographic position but rather to natural language acquisition that can take place even if you are not born and raised in an inner circle country (Ibid.). Furthermore, the geographical borders between the inner and outer circle become indistinct. Outer circle countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and India become more proficient in their functional native speaker use. English is used as a medium at schools for example in the Philippines or Singapore. Additionally, the intra-national use of English in everyday life is being increasingly integrated (Ibid., 211). Expanding circle countries or EFL regions<sup>1</sup> depend on standards from the inner circle. Nevertheless, EFL regions acculturate to the norm by bringing their culture and tradition into the language and thereby local varieties of English are being formed, yet internationally understandable (Ibid., 212). This norm-dependency of the expanding circle cannot be maintained. Yano proposes therefore to move from Kachru's geography-based *Three Concentric Circles Model* to a person-based model of English speakers, in which an English-speaking person is being distributed to a certain English level determined through his cross-cultural communicative competence (Ibid., 214-215). ***Yano's Three-Dimensional Cylindrical Model*** is to be explained and shown in the following.

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<sup>1</sup> EFL region means English as a Foreign Language region.

At the highest part of the cylinder thrones English as an International Language (EIL). EIL is the epitome of English expertness and cross-cultural communicative competence, meaning varieties of English that are internationally comprehensible (cf. Yano 2009, 216). The upward arrow that leads ultimately to EIL, stands for the level of proficiency. The

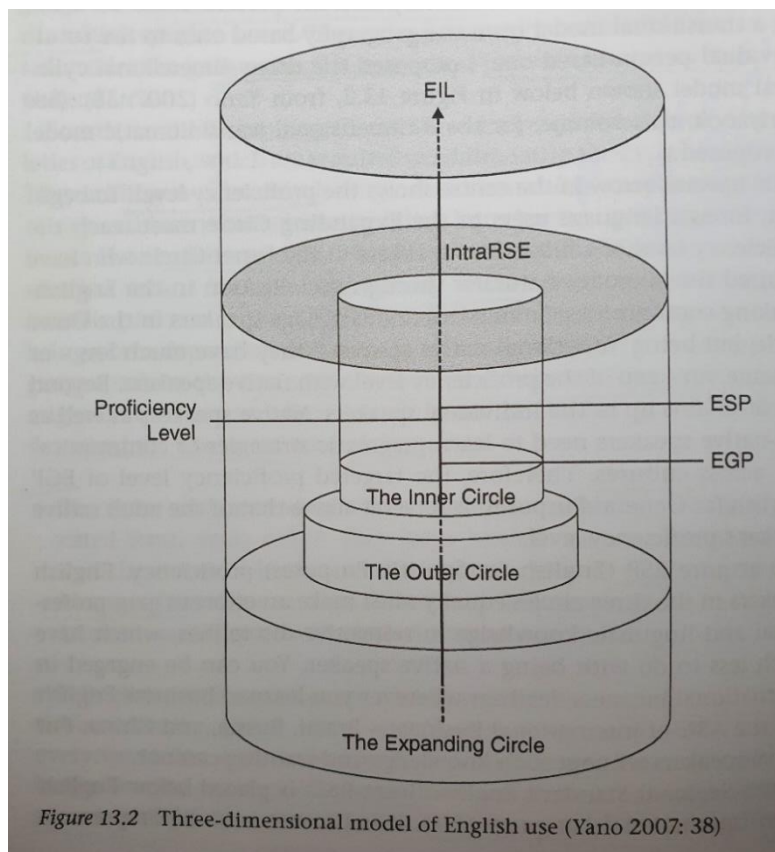


Figure 3 – Yano’s 3D cylindrical model (Yano 2009, 216).

expanding and outer circle need to acquire native-like proficiency in the same way inner circle speakers do. After this accomplishment, it is in the hand of the individual to gain pragmatic communicative competence (Ibid.). Above the inner circle, English for General Purposes (EGP) is placed and sets proficiency objectives a little bit higher than the native speaker one. In order to reach an even higher echelon on the scale, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) must be attained. In this proficiency level speakers cope with many unique language settings that have not necessarily to do with native-like proficiency for instance international business or meetiquette (Ibid., 215). In this respect, linguistic veda is of importance. As last instance before achieving EIL, Intra-Regional Standard English (Intra-RSE) must be acquired. It embodies the ability to communicate and liaise between broader regions and areas than Asia or Europe (Ibid., 215-216). Yano’s *Three-Dimensional Cylindrical Model* puts emphasis on the individual and his proficiency no matter whether the individual was born and raised in an inner circle country or not. In this model the individual

is being judged by his proficiency, pragmatic, and linguistic skills (cf. Yano 2009, 216). The assessment of proficiency is more precise and specific and more aspects like specific vocabulary as in ESP or cross-cultural communication as Intra-RSE are being looked at before an assignment to a level takes place. This model can certainly be used to classify the individuals' English proficiency. In the case of Laos, it performs more precisely than a geography-based model could.

### 1.3. Understanding World English(es) as Lingua Franca (ELF) in Asia

The future role of English in Asia is not to be underestimated since almost every country on this continent gave English the status of the second language to be learned after the national language. English is more and more integrated into everyday life and present in media, advertisements, public signs & documents and education (cf. Kirkpatrick and Sussex 2012, 2). As Jennifer Jenkins defined, **English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)** is: “*a means of communication in English between speakers who have different first languages* “ (Jenkins 2009, 41). In a nutshell, the focus lies on cross-regional communication between diverse English users. Its objective is to tailor the required demands of communication of speakers to their settings and purposes of conversation (cf. Pennycook 2012, 139). In comparison to World English(es), that shows the English language being shaped by cultural identities and pragmatic norms of the speakers' origin country. The concrete differences between these frameworks of ELF and WE lies therein in how vocabulary is used, pronunciation and code-mixing (cf. Oanh 2012, 109).

Variations of English(es) denotes the English language being influenced and formed by culture, traditions, and norms of the speaker. Hereby, **Asian English** portrays new variations of English(es) that refer to Asian countries, for example *Indian English, Japanese English, Filipino English* and *Singaporean English*. Each new localized form can possess subordinate varieties (cf. Kirkpatrick and Sussex 2012, 1-2). Within the Asian English countries **code-mixing** between the English variety and the local language develops to the natural language environment. A multi-lingual speaker is characterized through code-mixing and successful usage of ELF, if necessary (Ibid., 2).

Despite the development and spread of the English language throughout the world, there are voices whose aim it is to put a spotlight on local languages again. K. Bolton (Bolton 2012, 17) describes English “*as a ‘killer language’ threatening cultural and linguistic diversity*”. Political links between the inner circle countries and their surrounding circle countries that have been established through erstwhile colonies in Asia are discussed in



this field (cf. Bolton 2012, 17). It is said that the political and economic dominance of *core English-speaking countries* has a share in the establishment of **English linguistic imperialism** (Ibid.). Therefore, the global spread of English leads to a decrease in local languages being an integral part of the school curriculum, in order to boost the English language. Due to the omission of diverse local languages, higher school drop-out rates could be caused because students of ethnical minorities might not be able to learn a language, they neither speak nor understand. As a consequence, the implementation of English is actually counterproductive as it diminishes local language usage. (cf. Kirkpatrick 2012, 36-37). Hence local languages' longstanding history and cultural development is undermined by the implementation of the English language at schools, intended as the sole medium of communication. It is to pay heed to prevailing **multilingual settings** because English might not be the second language (L2) for every learner. More often it is the case that English is the third (L3), fourth (L4) or fifth language (L5) to be acquired (Ibid., 35). For now, Laos will be put to the front of the discourse. For instance, the students' mother tongue is Khmer and the regional lingua franca is Thai, as Thai media is widely available to the masses in Laos. Given that education is carried out in Lao, the student must learn Lao in order to be able to attend a school. If English is introduced as a medium of instruction in primary schools, English will be language number five to be understood and spoken by the student.

Kirkpatrick, therefore, proposes **mother tongue based multilingual education**<sup>2</sup> that allows education in the local languages and supports the students to get competent, fluent and literate in their local language prior to learning English. Moreover, a cultural preserve of local languages is maintained (cf. Kirkpatrick 2012, 35).

#### 1.4. Glocal English: The Status of Foreign Language Teaching in Laos

The amended Lao constitution of 2003, chapter 10 article 89 states that "*the Lao language and Lao script are the language and script officially used*" (Siphandone 2003, 18). In this way, the demands of an official language feature: the usage of the language as medium of instruction and usage in terms of intranational communication in governmental, social, cultural, scientific and technology matters (cf. Hamied 2012, 64-65). **Lao language** is accredited an important value through its official status (Ibid.). This official state shall radiate a sense of community, unification and Lao identity throughout the country and its

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<sup>2</sup> Mother tongue based multilingual education is abbreviated MTBMLE.

inhabitants. However, the multilingual setting of Laos and its rich and diverse ethnicities antagonize the aim of Lao language as an instrument of mustering Lao people through a common official language (cf. Hamied 2012, 65-67).

What is the role of foreign language teaching in the context of this beginning chapter in Laos? The promotion of English is highly relevant to Laos as they have joined the **ASEAN**<sup>3</sup> in 1997 (ASEAN 2007, 8). The ASEAN charter says in its article 34 that English must be the only working language. Nonetheless, it shall be attempted to draw attention to cultural diversity of ASEAN countries and show respect to its local languages (Ibid., 7- 29). On the grounds of global cooperation fostering English language capability must be one of the objectives (cf. Hamied 2012, 72).

During the course of Chapter 1 *World English(es) (WE)* and *English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)* have been highlighted. While WE are devoted to cultural and identity expression, ELF is devoted to cross-cultural communication (cf. Oanh 2012, 109). Considering the aim of cultural preserve of local languages and the problem of local languages being cut in the school curricula, a new requirement of cognitive paradigm arises. **Glocal English** unifies the terms global and local. Herby, English correlates with the local languages and the development of the specific Asian English(es) that are spoken in that country. The focus lies on adjusting the local values and communicative demands of non-English-speaking countries (Ibid., 108-109). After all, communication shall be kept intelligible (cf. Oanh 2012, 110). Thus, the role of English as a Lingua Franca is to be emphasized. In an ASEAN context successful communication is volitional rather than native-like language mastery. That is why MTBMLE is to be recommended in Laos against the background of its multilingual setting and ASEAN purposes.

## 2. Geographic and Historic Knowledge about Lao People's Democratic Republic

After the previous Chapter broached the issue of the theory of English(es). Chapter two introduces Lao people and its variety of ethnicities and their way of life. Furthermore, it is necessary to look at Lao People's Democratic Republic's geographical and demographical situation and history of education up until the entry of Laos into the *Association of South*

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<sup>3</sup> ASEAN is abbreviated Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

*East Asian Nations*, in order to be able to understand and link relations to issues in English learning in Lao schools nowadays that are being examined afterwards.

## 2.1. Geography and Demography

Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar are adjacent to Lao People's Democratic Republic<sup>4</sup> and make it the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia (cf. Noonan 2014, 154). This country offers 236,800 square kilometers of surface area that is inhabited by around 7.5 million people accounted from 2020. The population growth decreased over 28 years from 2.8 % in 1990 to 1.5 % in 2018. All that shows also in the population density of 30 people per square km (World Bank 2018a). The highest people density gathers around the capital city Vientiane, which is the more urbanized part of Laos.

Whereas the surrounding 18 provinces<sup>5</sup> are marked through mountain ranges and thick forest and jungle areas, which can be described as rural (Osborne et al. 2020). Despite the nationwide **infrastructure**, it is intermittently not possible to reach remote regions or villages. The road network is not comparable to western standards and climatic conditions impede transportation. The tropical monsoon climate of Laos and heavy rains during rainy season can cause floodings and landslips that make streets impassable (Engel für Kinder 2017). Another way of reaching people and traders is through aviation or river transportation. That is why Lao people settle in close vicinity to the Mekong river that flows from south to west (Osborne et al. 2020). Moreover, a railway system from Vientiane to the Chinese border in Kunming is currently under construction and expected to be finished by the end of 2021. In this way, people will be enabled to travel from Bangkok through Laos to China by train (Clark 2020).

As can be seen in Figure 4, 32.4 % of the **population** is under 15 and 28.7 % under 29 years of age. It is arguable that the population of Laos is youthful. This is as well reflected in a fertility rate of 2.7 % children per woman, but lower life expectancy of 68 years (World Bank 2018a). Still to be recognized as critical problems are malnutrition and maternal mortality. In 2017 185 mothers died per 1,000 births and 30 % of children under the age of five suffered from malnutrition (Ibid.). The population of Laos consists of a **multitude of**

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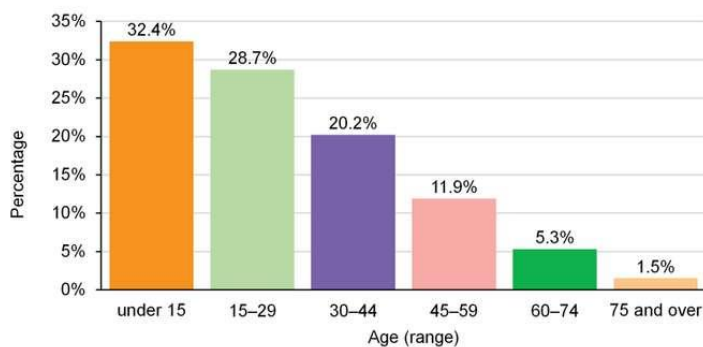
<sup>4</sup> Lao People's Democratic Republic is abbreviated through Lao P.D.R.

<sup>5</sup> Lao provinces consist of Phongsali, Luang Namtha, Bokeo, Oudomxai, Luang Prabang, Huaphan, Xayabouri, Xieng Khouang, Vientiane province, Vientiane prefecture, Saysomboune, Borikhamsay, Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravan, Sekong, Champasak and Attapeu.

**ethnicities** and can be designated as linguistically diverse. The notion of Lao shall unify around 50 peoples and it can be compartmentalized into three main subcategories: Lao Lum, Lao Theung and Lao Sung (cf. Schulze 2013, 24-25). Lao Lum (Lowland Lao) live near the banks of the Mekong and belong to Tai-Lao people. Subgroupings of the Tai-Lao are: Lao, Tai, Ngouan, Yang, Xaek, Tai-Lue, Phu Tai, Tai Neua and their languages belong to Tai-Kadai language families and therefore resemble Thai language. A considerable part of the Lao Lum is devoted to Buddhism and make their living with rice cultivation. This grouping depicts 65% of the population (Ibid., 24).

At the time when Lao Lum migrated into the country, the indigenous Lao Theung people have been bumped to middle altitudes and are since known as mountain slope Lao. The Lao Theung are allocated to Mon-Khmer language family (Ibid., 24-25). They cover one fourth of the population and compromise Khmu, Lamet, Katang, Makong, Jru' and Brao groupings (Britannica 2020). Referred to as Mon-Khmer people, Mon-Khmer are proponents of animistic belief and hence take actions in agricultural work (cf. Schulze 2013, 24-25). The last classification of Lao is the Lao Sung, also called mountain top Lao referring to their settlement in the highlands of the mountains. They have migrated from China to Laos and can be subdivided into two main groups: Hmong-Mien and Tibeto-Burman. They make a living from slash-and-burn agriculture and the Mien believe in Taoism. Accumulated Laos Sung groupings represent 11.5 % of the Lao population (Ibid., 25).

Laos age breakdown (2018)



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Figure 4 Laos age breakdown (Britannica 2018).

## 2.2. Socio-Economic Background

With a poverty headcount ratio of 18.3 % of the population according to the national poverty threshold (World Bank 2018a) and an unemployment rate of 25 % in May 2020 (World Bank

2021), Lao People's Democratic Republic has the status of the least developed country. This status shall be left by 2025 (United Nations). Though, the COVID-19 situation deteriorates the macroeconomic position and development of the past years and shrinks economic growth to an estimated value of -2.4 % in 2020, inasmuch as the service, tourism and travel branches experience a collapse of revenues (World Bank 2021). Although the major contributors of income are the industrial and agricultural sectors with accumulated 48 % of the *Gross Domestic Product* (World Bank 2018a). The economy and government of Lao P.D.R. are reliant on foreign aid, investment, and financial outside support. The management of these sums concomitants with augmented corruption. Corruption was widespread in the past. However the current government fights it with certain policies (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 21).

In terms of education, Laos has reached a literacy rate of total 84,7 % in 2015. As a side note, there are gender gaps and a rural-urban divide in the means of literacy. The accessibility of education is simpler in urban provinces compared to rural areas with less infrastructure. Nevertheless, literacy rates are increasing (cf. Lao Statistics Bureau 2016, 61). Although there is room for improvement. In the past, education could be provided to members of certain sections of society, so to say the elite, who had monetary resources and political connections to the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 21). This is to be further examined in the following subchapter.

The country is willing to graduate from their LDC status, reaching for sustainable growth in education, economy, and social development (Ibid.). It is to say that the COVID-19 situation might throw Laos back in their development as mentioned above.

### 2.3. Historic Educational Background

When Laos was occupied under **French colonial rule** from 1893 – 1954, the French introduced a formalized school system. Before, education was passed on free of cost in Buddhist temples to children who wanted to become a nun or a monk. During colonial rule with France as a role model, lesson plans included French history, language and culture and was taught in the first primary and secondary schools (Zeck 2016). These schools were inaccessible for most of the population and lessons divorced from the real world and circumstances that dominated in Laos. At that time most Lao people worked in agriculture and have not been introduced to a formal schooling system (Ibid.). Generally speaking, the economic interest of the French in Laos was low, and this showed in low human resources.

Consequently, an education elite has been cultivated that consisted of wealthier upper-class households, who could be deployed later on under French rule (Zeck 2016).

In 1954 Laos gained independence and the officially accepted *Royal Lao Government* (RLG) superseded French colonial control. Prior to that, the *Pathet Lao* established and represent the communist antagonists of the RLG (Zeck 2017). The **political dichotomy** split Laos into two parts: supporters of the right-wing RLG, backed by the USA, and communistic Pathet Lao backed by the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China and North Vietnam. According to this, two different education systems were implemented. On the one hand the **Pathet Lao**, they especially had supporters from ethnic minorities because they provided accessible education for free (Ibid.). In order to get away from the French implemented system and language, they made efforts to realize Lao language as official language in schools. Furthermore, they wanted to build their own education system that aimed to build more primary and secondary schools to fight illiterateness and to be able to provide higher education in Laos. Beforehand higher education had been provided by Vietnam and Russia and was therefore dependent on liberated zones (Ibid.). On the other hand, the **Royal Lao Government** pursued the French education system. With the help of monetary assistance by the USAID<sup>6</sup> and CIA<sup>7</sup> the RLG obtained means to strive against communism embodied through Pathet Lao and North Vietnam. From 1962 the RLG reconfigured the French elitist system and transferred the focus from French to Lao in schools to adjust to Lao people's needs in education. The Laoization process and dissemination of education rather miscarried because the system built on French teachers and support. Hence, it was decided to follow suit the Pathet Lao education system and further invest in secondary and teacher training education (Ibid.).

After the simultaneous upswing in education, a downswing followed due to the expansion of aerial warfare by the US. Thereby, the intention of the US was to cut supply lines of Vietnam on the *Ho-Chi Minh trail* through ordnance droppings. The number of bombings totals to two million ordnances that caused dreadful consequences for Lao people. The *Secret war*, as it is referred to today, metamorphoses Lao people into refugees and made everyday life impossible and made people seek for security and shelter (Ibid.).

The RLG faced diminishing monetary assistance from the USAID since the USA withdrew from Vietnam beginning from 1973. As a consequence, the RLG suffered a loss of devotees. Furthermore, disaffection increased regarding the official ruling Lao government and USAID caused by living conditions during the Secret war (Ibid.). The discontent resulted in a

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<sup>6</sup> USAID is the abbreviation for United States Agency for International Development.

<sup>7</sup> CIA is the shortform of Central Intelligence Agency.

**military coup**, in which the Pathet Lao prompted the USAID to end their undertakings in Laos. Thus, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1975 marks the reunification of Laos and manifestation of Lao people's Democratic Republic (Zeck 2017). Due to the military coup by the Pathet Lao communists in 1975, the only university in Laos, Sisavangvong University, abrogated and higher education was not accessible anymore from 1975 to 1996 (cf. Martin 2020b, 206). Consequently, many educated people, mostly the royalist community, departed from Laos to seek for tertiary education and created a lack of qualified labor force in Laos (Ibid.). 20 years of low or **non-education** led to a reformation attempt of Lao economy to meet the demands of an international market and better educated labor power. The National University of Laos established in 1996. Hence, the education system needed to be reformed and rewritten (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 30). Laos welcomed any form of foreign support and took a chance with their entry into ASEAN in 1997. English language learning came more strongly into focus again since the independence from the USA in 1975 and being implemented as a compulsory class from secondary school on (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 182).

### 3. The Current Education System and English Education

After looking at educational history of Laos, Chapter 3 will present the current Laotian schooling system with its chances and limitations. Firstly, the general education offers will be explained and conditions of learning and teaching examined. Secondly, a look at the role of teachers and students is taken. Thirdly, political factors that influence language teaching are taken into consideration. The examination of all these categories are necessary to bring light to the question what factors cause unequal English proficiency in Laos.

#### 3.1. The Education System

The Lao education system is administrated by the Ministry of Education<sup>8</sup> that develops the educational curriculum (cf. Dorner and Gorman 2011, 7). In general, education in Laos is exempt from charges and eight years of schooling are compulsory (Hays 2008). If no class is repeated during the years of school duty, a student will graduate with a lower-secondary

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Education is abbreviated MOE.

degree. Many villages offer primary education. Any further secondary and tertiary education are better accessible for more urbanized families. Though, it is not possible for some parents to send their children to school because they cannot afford to pay fees for registration, textbooks, learning utensils, school uniforms and they cannot allow themselves to lose the helping hands of their children in their self-catering households during harvesting seasons (Hays 2008). Whilst raining seasons schools are on holiday, because heavy rains would hinder students to get to schools. Therefore, the school year builds up of 33 weeks per year. A teaching period equates 45 minutes (cf. UNESCO 2011). The next steps are describing the current Lao education system closer with each stave of the educational ladder.

Before entering primary school, Lao parents have the opportunity to send their children aged from 3 months to 3 years old to crèches. From the age of 3 to 5 years kindergartens take care of the children. Under the MoE *School Readiness Competencies* have been determined to evaluate the students' development and to be sure the students are game for the next school level (Ibid.). **Early Childhood Education**<sup>9</sup> aims to prepare children for primary school in fundamental social, emotional, artistic, physical skills and taking first steps into speaking, listening and writing. However, it is not compulsory to join pre-school education (Ibid.). Mostly urban living and richer families make use of ECE to increase their kids' readiness for the primary level. In 2018 46.46% children were enrolled (cf. Prix 2020, 14).

Pre-schooling is followed by primary schooling. Children enter this stage at the age of 6 years. It takes five years to complete **primary education** with a certificate (cf. UNESCO 2011). Though, school progression is slow as it takes up to 10 years instead of planned 5 to produce a primary graduate (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 13). The overall goal to optimize education quality for everyone in the country could be obtained and shows in a primary net enrollment rate of 91.47% in 2018. High repetition and dropout rates are not to be underestimated, because only 81.1% of the students remain in primary school until the completion at the end of year 5 (cf. Prix 2020, 14). Reasons for dropouts and class repetition can be unilingual lessons. Students from multi-ethnic groups and upland areas might not be able to follow a lesson held in Lao language, because they speak their tribal language and it collapses due to the lacking preparation for school of children (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 57). Consequently, they cannot follow the lesson and have to repeat classes or dropout from school. In 2011 an average rate of 15.9 % of repeaters was discovered (cf. UNESCO 2011). Most children come from poorer families and parents might not be able to

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<sup>9</sup> Early Childhood Education is in short ECE.



pay for all opportunity costs that education brings with it (cf. Prix 2020, 14). In addition, some children have to help to support their family financially and take care of family members. That is why parents might sign out their children from school before completion. Another reason might be that schools cannot offer a full five-year-cycle of primary education due to unqualified and overloaded staff, incomplete facilities and materials and teacher absenteeism (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 57), to be explained deeper in Chapter 3.2. Despite compulsory primary education, primary school attendance will remain an offer for some children.

The major goal of **secondary education** consists therein to provide students with basics of natural science, mathematics, social science, English language, computer science and the mastery of Lao language. Secondary schooling can be separated into three years of lower and additional three years of general upper secondary school or three years of secondary vocational school (cf. UNESCO 2011). The completion of upper secondary education is rewarded with a diploma that allows the student to pursue his education in attending vocational or technical training schools. These training schools offer three-to-four-year programs depending on the graduation level (Ibid.). In 2018 the secondary net enrollment rate constituted 60.01 %. However, secondary education is not necessarily pursuable for Laotian students. The reasons for school dropouts mentioned above also apply for secondary school (cf. Prix 2020, 14). Absenteeism caused by other work duty, unfinished certificates, backlog demand and early pregnancies or marriages cause that 40 % of the students from an age range from 11-17 do not avail themselves of secondary education (Ibid.).

After the inauguration of the National University of Laos<sup>10</sup> in 1975, **higher education** was made accessible again for Laotians (See 2.3.). Since then, three more public universities were built and several private universities and Teacher Training Institutions (TEI)<sup>11</sup> are distributed all over the country today. Students have the opportunity to seek different levels of certificates (cf. UNESCO 2011). There are academic programs that last for three years and are rewarded with a higher diploma. To get on a Bachelors' level two years of compulsory basic studies and five years of main studies are to be fulfilled. It is also possible to take part in Master or Doctoral programs, whereby Master programs take up to two and Doctoral programs up to three years. The academic year consists of two semesters that last for 16 weeks (Ibid.). In 2018 the gross enrollment rate of tertiary education accounted 14.97% (cf. Prix 2020, 14).

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<sup>10</sup> National University of Laos also known as NUOL.

<sup>11</sup> TEI stands for Teacher Training Institution.

### 3.2. Teaching and Learning Conditions

Learning outcomes are determined by teaching and learning conditions that teachers and students face. The better equipped the school, the bigger is the toolbox that teachers can resort to when they look for support for their teaching and to maintain quality. The less odds students face, the more they can profit from education and take part in it. In the following, obstacles that have to be overcome are being examined to help understand why certain conditions in Laos hinder learning outcomes.

Conditions of teaching are troublesome for a number of reasons and can be an obstacle to educational change. Most schools lack basic equipment, resources, teaching material and course books. Looking into a Lao classroom, multi-grade classrooms and high pupil-to-teacher ratios can be observed. What exactly does a Lao classroom look like? To cater to the number of students, every classroom is used to its capacities. The average **pupil-teacher-ratio** is 30 students to one teacher. In high-density ethnic minority areas higher ratios of up to 50:1 were observed (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 52-54). High pupil-teacher-ratios can be a result of a lacking teacher supply. Eminently, remote and rural areas are deprived from that and they struggle to attract teachers. Therefore, it is exceptionally unlikely to execute national teaching guidelines (Ibid., 47). Not only pupil-teacher-ratios place obstacles. The circumstances of **multigrade classes** make matters worse. Teacher and financial scarceness force schools to fill classrooms with students from different grades to ensure school progression for every grade (Ibid., 57-58). The multi-grade setting sets barriers for teachers insofar that their teaching strategies need to be customized for every



Figure 5 Ban Phang Heng Primary School (own source).

child of each school level represented in the classroom. It signifies the teacher, preparation of diverse teaching material and tailoring those to the specific needs of children from different cognitive levels, demands on time and it means simultaneous instruction of all students (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 57). Teachers are requested to cope with multiple syllabi and consummate time-management. Pupil-teacher-ratios and the multigrade setting pose quite a challenge to teachers that is nearly impossible to teachers who lack teacher training and experience (Ibid., 58).

How well a school is equipped can be a determinant for positive school attainment. Here, speaking of **classroom conditions** that enable frictionless lessons, for instance electricity, blackboards, chalk, benches and desks or electric fans to tolerate heat. Populations located in the highlands of Laos are disadvantaged by school infrastructure. The poorer the infrastructure, the greater is the average school incompleteness (Ibid., 48). During half a year of practical training in Laos, it showed that Lao students are seated tightly and have to have their outdated textbooks shared with their bench-neighbors. Blackboards and chalk are available. The classroom itself is broom-cleaned and has sufficient light through electricity in role-model schools. In terms of teaching aids, it is important to say, that some schools provide computers, mostly donated. Nevertheless, they neither have access to the internet nor is the amount of computers adequate to cater to every student. Much in the same way as textbook scarceness it can lead to lesson distractions and interruptions because students need to share material and they are ensnared to pay less attention and collaborate during lessons. Additionally, visualizations prove difficult because of the sparse availability of printers, laminators, and computer projectors. Some schools can afford to print in black and white. A shortage of resources means teachers have less options to underline their teaching. By way of example, it is not possible to give homework in a textbook when not every student can take a textbook home to work with it. Teachers are challenged to work according to the maximum principle. That is, efficient use of given resources to maximize utilities for the students. Figure 5 shows a Lao primary class in a role model school. Here, too, the classroom is filled to its maximum. The room itself appears to be uninviting for communicative groupwork but teaching basics are given such as desks, benches, a blackboard, and chalk.

Article 22 of the Lao Constitution states that:

*“The State and society attend to developing high quality national education, to create opportunities and [favourable] conditions in education for all people throughout the country, especially people in remote areas, ethnic groups, women and disadvantaged children”* (Siphandone 2003, 5).

According to the constitution education must be attainable for every Lao citizen no matter what social status, sex or ethnic group belonging. However, not every citizen can execute their **right of education** due to school incompleteness, lacking school infrastructure and linguistic obstacles of ethnic minorities. To provide basic education to the entire population issues a challenge to the Lao government with the result that students are denied schooling because of financial difficulties of the state and deprived backgrounds of the student (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 26-27).

### 3.2.1. Teachers Preparedness

External factors that compose the Lao education system were outlined but how can teachers deal with educational circumstances, how does teacher training prepare future teachers for the Lao education system and how do you become a teacher in Lao P.D.R?

There are three different paths in existence of becoming a **primary teacher** that partition in three certificates a) 5+4 b) 8+3 and c) 11+1. Qualification a) 5+4 targets soon-to-be teachers in remote areas. It builds from the completion of the full primary cycle plus four years of additional teacher training. While 8+3 qualification sets up from the completion of lower secondary besides three years teacher preparation training. Today, path b) is the minimum demand on teachers. The last path of becoming a primary teacher structures through the completion of upper secondary school and one extra year of teacher training (cf. UNESCO 2011). To become a lower **secondary teacher**, it takes 11 years of schooling plus three years of teacher preparation training. Whereas 11 years schooling and additional five years of pre-service training allows candidates to teach at upper secondary schools (Ibid.). Teachers receive pre-service teacher training at Teacher Training Colleges<sup>12</sup>, currently five in existence, that issue high-level certificates for prospective secondary teachers. The Faculty of Education at the NUOL also provides degree level qualification. There are three additional Teacher Training Schools<sup>13</sup> that issue medium-level certificates to teach at pre and primary schools. In the future TTSs are envisioned to be fused with TTCs (Ibid.). Teacher candidates enter TEIs through Quota, Non-Quota, Exams and Nangobay programs. Quota candidates go through an extensive application process, whereas non-Quota candidates are mostly candidates who have failed during the application but are admitted for tuition fees. Exam candidates undergo examinations, and their scores determine admission. The last channel to enter TEIs is Nangobay, candidates are selected through the submission of an application letter (Ibid.). Except Non-Quota, all channels are

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<sup>12</sup> TTC is the abbreviation of Teacher Training Colleges.

<sup>13</sup> Teacher Training School is abbreviated TTS.

free of charge. On a darker note, candidates might lose motivation because becoming a teacher was not their first choice, but one of low economic circumstances because they chose the path of becoming a teacher because it is free of charge. On the downside, candidates, who failed the examination might be excluded from entering TEIs, if they cannot afford to pay tuition fees for the Non-Quota program (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 26). The length of teacher training is used as a yardstick of qualification. In 2014 the number of primary teachers totaled 36,938. 98 % passed through TEIs and among this number 27.6% are trained with 8+3 qualification that does not fit to hold a candle to the minimum standard qualification (cf. UNESCO 2014, 26). Similar to the number of trained primary teachers, the number of trained lower and upper secondary school is high. 99.6 % of total 32,746 secondary teachers are trained. Among 99.6 %, 59 % have 11+3 qualifications that allow to teach at lower secondary schools (Ibid., 27).

### 3.2.2. Teacher Performance and Challenges

Teachers meet disproportionate challenges in processing the mass of students and considering all their needs and interests (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 48). Currently, the qualification 11+1 is the minimum standard to teach at a lower secondary school. Though, quality education depends on the **quality of teacher training**, one third of Lao teachers have not received formal teacher training and are quasi ill-prepared to adapt their teaching methodology to the conditions of a Lao classroom (Ibid., 102). For all that, formal teacher training does not necessarily go hand in hand with improved quality of teacher performance. Teachers that attend TEIs are procured textbook-centered and reproductive teaching strategies (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 34) and those are brought into the classroom. 70.6 % of teachers have a lesson plan for their lesson. Lessons distinguish through frontal teaching, copying from the blackboard, memorization, and recitation. Thereby, students are exposed to a constant stream of information, in English lessons grammar topics, and become inactive addressees (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 83-86). As mentioned in Chapter 3.2. the teaching material scarceness for textbooks, technical aids, office supplies and helpful examples of teaching material handicaps teachers in their classes because it is necessary to resort to **teacher-centered methods** so that every student has the same chance to follow the lesson and not be disadvantaged by unavailability of resources because there is simply no budget. If textbooks are in stock, they reveal to have linguistic and intercultural obstacles that seem to be irreconcilable in a Lao classroom. With the result that teaching methodology misses variation (cf. Martin 2020a). Changes within the curriculum of TEIs towards more student-centered and communicative approaches disregarded the private and work-related

circumstances of teachers and rather soured the quality of teacher training (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 34).

After school resources and available means were picked out as a central theme, teacher payment looms no other picture. **Teacher salaries** are extremely low and insufficient to cover all living expenses as they are located roughly above the per capita poverty line (cf. Benveniste et al. 2007, 105). Besides, a lack of salary and job incentives diminish good teacher performance. The only ticket punch means director of school and offers few opportunities of career advancement in so far as to take on more responsibility and receive higher payment. Financial rewards for working conditions like multigrade classroom, rural area, shift work or salary incentives for attendance of in-service training, good teacher award, years of experience and achievement of students do exist, but these increases in salary are extremely low with the result that placed incentives are not stimulative for teachers to impel (Ibid., 67-70). Around 140 Euros monthly of basic payment to spend, that is not necessarily paid regularly or with delay, it is only coherent that teachers supplement their income through **second jobs** to achieve stable income. Most commonly agricultural work that requires lots of physical strain and obliges them to absent from school during harvesting season. Subsequently, lesson planning gets a raw deal and teachers revert to frontal teaching and reproduction to compensate their workload through less labor-intensive methodologies (Ibid., 105).

Despite low payment, teaching is highly regarded as a profession in Laos. The social value shows in the national celebration of Teacher's Day and **higher status** within their community. At the same time social status puts pressure on teachers to behave and act like role models in their spare time as the community and the home villages observe.

One way or the other the **teaching profession** itself makes a draft on free disposable time through test corrections, conferences, parent evenings and lesson planning. It requires commitment. To revert to textbook-centered methods economizes the teachers' time that must be saved for side jobs. Thus, teachers feel fatigued by their amount of work and it can cause a loss of enthusiasm for their profession (cf. Jacob 2019). This leads to teachers leaving their job due to discontentment of salaries and labor conditions (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 34) and that anon leads to uneven allocation of teachers amidst the different provinces. Provinces in the north, for instance Phongsaly or Huaphanh, face **teacher shortages**, while others like Vientiane Capital or Xayabury show a surplus of teachers. Withal remote areas lack qualified teachers that descend from the same ethno-linguistic group (cf. UNESCO 2014, 22) fueling unilingual education that excludes ethnic minorities. **Unilingual education** states a problem in discrimination of ethnic minorities and quality and development of

English language education. By the time, Lao people need to leave their comfort zone, represented through oral communication in English, the risk of losing face arises and an English teacher rather reverts to his native language as language of instruction in defiance of English education (cf. Jacob 2019).

### 3.2.3. The Role of the Students

To further explore factors to limited English proficiency in Laos, the role of the students must be reconnoitered. Linguistically, students face differences in grammar, phonology, and script. The implementation of new Latin script, word order and emphasis of English words are a few **linguistic obstacles** of a great many to overcome. There are scant linguistic similarities that Lao students can transfer from their first to second language (cf. Jacob 2019). Here, I would like to refer to subchapter 1.3. that delineates the multilingual setting in Laos. English might not be the second language to acquire but rather language number 3, 4 or 5. It is probable to get confused with all the different language systems. Especially when the new language is introduced at an early stage and students do not have a concept of their mother tongue language and are expected to learn English (cf. Kirkpatrick 2012, 37).

Laos' multi-ethnic population and ASEAN context puts meaningful communication into focus. It is not the overall goal to achieve native-like proficiency but successful communication as implied in 1.4. However, available teaching resources for English language represent in the majority of the cases their target culture, which is attributed to inner circle countries e.g., America, Great Britain and Australia (cf. Dengler 2017, 248). Content that is covered within existing material for instance food, famous persons, holidays, and cities usually deals with European or Western cultures and assumes knowledge about the culture and its concepts, which makes it difficult to understand **cultural differences** from an Asian point of view. It is necessary to regard the context of material to step aside from misunderstandings and intercultural barriers. In the process the students' interests and needs need to be involved in the context of teaching material to make it better tangible. The role of the teacher is to raise awareness for the significance of intertextual context and help the students to explore its potential meaning. Thereby, successful communication is more likely to succeed (cf. Dengler 2017, 246-249).

Limited opportunities of **exposure** and usage of English beyond the classroom are given, because there are no native speakers as interlocutors and English is not used or encouraged to speak by their family surroundings and communities (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 187). The chance of authentic language assets can be seen in mobile phones.

The World Bank states that 25% of the population uses the internet on a daily basis (World Bank 2018a). Most of the young Lao people possess a mobile phone with internet access. Social media is actively used and offers an idle asset that could be fruitful for English Language Teaching<sup>14</sup>. If teachers integrate the mobile phone during their lesson, they combine authentic language exposure and involve the student's interest in technology.

In comparison to western countries, Lao people tend to be very shy and reserved. Face-threatening acts as in 3.2.2. like communicating and speaking, which is necessary to learn a language, are to be avoided and therefore a **foreign language anxiety**<sup>15</sup> is probable to set in (cf. Oxford 2017, 190-191). To understand what peer-pressure weighs on students might give solutions how to interfere as a teacher. Some students may be willing to engage in class, but firstly they observe because they want to know which role they play in the group (cf. Lamb 2017, 29). Resulting in avoidance behavior during English lessons because students anticipate embarrassment, social humiliation, and scrutiny when they are expected to interact in the English language. FLA is usually rooted in social anxiety. To intervene negative emotions like anxiety the teacher shall create a learning environment, in which positive emotions, intrinsic motivation, agency, hope and optimism are nurtured (cf. Oxford 2017, 190-191). Furthermore, teachers need to develop understanding for the students' needs, feelings and former language experiences that might interfere with the current performance (cf. Lamb 2017, 29).

Motivation and effective learning strategies are considered to be key concepts for successful language acquisition (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 185). If students lack learning skills, their learning achievement can suffer. The poorer socio-economic background of Laos deteriorates **tailored support** for weaker students (Ibid., 185). English implementation suffers through lower qualification of teaching staff, curriculum design, unavailability of resources as shown in 3.2. Challenges of the teacher in 3.2.2. like the multigrade classroom and lack of methodology prohibit to adapt teaching strategies and provide specific help for the students' learning needs and learning obstacles (Ibid., 185-186).

Overall, there is a **lack of motivation** on the teacher's and student's side, which derives on the one hand from extrinsic causes and on the other hand from intrinsic causes. Extrinsic, structural problems are caused through poor teacher training, class sizes, school equipment, school attendance, school infrastructure, teacher salaries and weaker curriculum design (Ibid., 188). Intrinsic causes for lower motivation of students are the

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<sup>14</sup> English Language Teaching is abbreviated ELT.

<sup>15</sup> Foreign Language Anxiety is in short FLA.



missing vision of the future English-speaking self. The significance of English as a global language and its importance for international workforce is not valued enough by students (cf. Dengler 2017, 244). Exercises to help the students feeling comfortable in using English fills the picture of their future English-Self ideal with life. This can be done through role plays or dialogues or artistic expression, in which they can experiment with their identity and use language to express themselves creatively and make communication more authentic (cf. Lamb 2017, 18). Pupils are likely to engage more in their studies when they have the feeling of **self-autonomy**. The teacher is supposed to give the students the opportunity to choose which activity is meaningful to them and foster competence, relatedness and own perception of autonomy (Ibid., 15). Knowledge about motivation types can help to foster and support internal motivation of the students. If motivation is implemented in the classroom, engagement will take place and the ELT can take place strongly motivated (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 185).

### 3.3. The Political Factor

The education budget represented 11.8 % of total government expenditure in 2014 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2014). **Education expenditure** assembles from salaries and wages for teachers and administrative staff, which represents more than 80 % of the current budget, and expenditure for operating education. Within the education budget, investments on buildings and equipment are factored out (cf. UNESCO 2014, 4-5). In comparison to the past years there has been considerable improvement in flow of goods, dedication towards the education department and a general increase of the educational budget. However, the realization is still far from satisfactory (Ibid.). The gap between educational objectives and availability of needed resources continues and Laos is dependent on foreign investment in the educational sector. Nevertheless, the domestic education budget remains low at 6.2 % (Ibid., 5). because monetary foreign aid is likely to be staked in other sectors that are given higher priorities such as health, infrastructure, malnutrition or shelter. At the same time, corruption is not to be glossed over. The shortage of money spent on education within the government is insufficient to cover all wage-related costs and teachers need to take on second jobs, which torpedoes preparation time on lessons, resulting in lower quality lessons (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 35). The following explanation of UNESCO gives a closer understanding of the issue.

*“the number of teachers that is possible to employ depends in part on cost, which is mediated by salary levels. If salaries are too high this may constrain capacity and if they are too low the quality of learning will suffer” (UNESCO, 2002: 11) (Bäcktorp 2007, 35).*

If this vicious circle is brought to boil, lower quality lessons lead to lower learning outcomes and ultimately to higher rates of class repeaters or out-of-school children. Repeaters stay longer in school than envisaged and this causes more expensive education for the Lao government. On the other side, private school and university institutions, mostly funded by British, provide education to the elite of the Lao population and place thereby another obstacle in equalizing opportunities amongst multi-ethnic groups (cf. UNESCO 2014, 14).

Due to Laos' multi-ethnic population, the country faces obstacles in **language policy**. Lao as the official national language implemented by the prevailing ethnic group supplies Lao Lum with linguistic assets that grant them enhancement of economic options that elude chances among other ethnicities. A decisive factor to counterbalance chances is the language of instruction during lessons (cf. Gill 2012, 55). Intelligible lessons enable linguistic groups access to economic opportunities and social mobility. Leaving the choice of language to the schools' discretion, might minimize the rural-urban divide through language policy (Ibid., 55-57).

In order to assure educational quality, provision of universal basic education and fight against illiteracy, the RIES<sup>16</sup> was made responsible for curriculum design and development (cf. UNESCO 2011). English language as a key influence of the language curriculum in Asian countries can be steadied through the ongoing growth of an **Asian middle class** (cf. Bolton 2012, 20-21). Plenty Asian societies such as India, Singapore, Hong Kong or South Korea gain massive economic growth, experience economic change and hence are estimated to expand their middle class rapidly, but therethrough outstrip poorer countries such as Cambodia, Bangladesh and Laos (Ibid.). The spread of English is desired and accordingly necessary to remain competitive on the international market. English will no longer be a foreign language to acquire, but a general-purpose ability. Poorer Asian countries might be handicapped through sparse English language access and discriminated not to be in play globally (Ibid.). Therefore, the **importance of English language** has been acknowledged since the entry of Laos into the ASEAN in 1997 and ever since been launched as a compulsory part of the curriculum, although the RIES could not remedy to set educational objectives for the English subject. (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 182). Notwithstanding that foreign investment puts a moral imperative on curriculum design that determines ambiance of cooperation (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 36). The curriculum is currently

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<sup>16</sup> RIES stands for Research Institute for the Educational Sciences.

under construction with the help of foreign teaching experts (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 189). **Foreign educational support** is to be treated with caution because the issue of applying western structures, cultures or concepts onto Asian context is probable to malfunction for the simple reason that western educational structures are not designed for Asian students' needs, interests, and cultural understanding. Engagers and supporters are obliged to decolonialize their minds, biases, opinions, and work ethics in order to cooperate successfully (cf. Martin 2020a, 213-214). Regional ELT is reinvented through the founding of the ASEAN. As members of the ASEAN, it is relevant to be able to communicate with interlocutors from other ASEAN countries. The **ASEAN ELT curriculum** therefore is required to mirror the needs of both dialogue partners, history of ASEAN and cultural aspects of ASEAN member states to develop cross-cultural understanding and eventually feed the ASEAN identity (cf. Kirkpatrick 2012, 38-39).

#### 4. English Language Teaching in Southeast Asia Using the Example of the Philippines

Up to now concepts of WE, Asian English(es) and glocal English were introduced. It was looked at Laos' geographics and educational history and it was delineated which contextual factors influence English proficiency in Laos in illuminating the current education system. After Laos' vision they want to take action and they have already taken steps to graduate from their LDC status. The focus shall be laid on other Asian countries and how they cope with ELT. The Philippines are geographically recumbent in South East Asia. The island has no adjacent countries, but it is surrounded by Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Vietnam, China and Papua New Guinea. Around 106 million people inhabit the so-called threshold country (World Bank 2018b). The ELT paradigm of the Philippines has been chosen because most of the people possess English proficiency and the country has managed to overcome the status of a developing country, which shall be the aspiration of Laos future development.

##### 4.1. From American Colonial Rule to Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education

*“Take up the White man's burden  
Send forth the best ye breed  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need*

*To wait in heavy harness  
On fluttered folk and wild  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half devil and half child [...]*

*Take up the White man's burden  
And reap his old reward:  
The blame of those ye better,  
The hate of those ye guard,  
The cry of hosts ye humour,  
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light:  
Why brought ye us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian night? [...]" (Kipling 1992, 127-128).*

*The White Man's Burden* was written by Rudyard Kipling in 1899. The chosen two verses of the poem crystalize the colonial self-justification during the time of imperialism. Kipling famously emphasizes to '*take up the white man's burden*' (Kipling 1992, 127-128). The anaphora heralds all seven verses to allegorize colonialization like an urge to help "subhuman beings" bringing modernization to them. He further legitimizes imperial actions for the reason of superiority compared to non-white people. In the first verse non-white people are described as: '[...] *sullen peoples, half devil and half child* [...]' (Kipling 1992, 127-128). Through exploitation of non-white people, it is ultimately rendered possible to expand the white man's empire. This concealed noble mission of the conquerors influenced past-occupied countries until present in spite of gained independence.

In the case of the Philippines it was first the Spanish rule from 1565 until 1898, then perpetuated by American colonial control until 1946 (cf. Bolton 2012, 19). The impact of colonialization of English Language Teaching in the Philippines is immense and influences ELT policies and curricula up to now. The Americans introduced a new American public school system after 300 years under Spanish colonial rule, which was received well because of less expenses. American teachers started to educate local teachers since the English language was highly regarded and due to the interest of the USA to spread their language. Furthermore, English was established as the sole medium of instruction for other subjects and mimicry of native speakers was aimed (cf. Canilao et al. 2017, 130). ELT policies have been under construction in the course of time. At first, local languages constituted the primary medium of instruction until the 1940s. Afterwards, English as a second language did take over until the 1970s (Ibid.). Very shortly after the policy transferred into a bilingual education policy, that declares English and Filipino as media of instruction. Additionally, the constitution of 1987 amplifies a bilingual education policy in declaring Filipino and English as official languages and local languages as supplementary. Though, there was a turning back to local languages in 2009 in the context of Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (Ibid., 130-131). On the basis of research that found

students achieve better results using local languages as medium of instruction compared to English as a sole medium introduced by the Americans (cf. Canilao et al. 2017:130-131). As can be seen in Figure 7 other vernaculars than Filipino constitute a major part of the linguistic map of the Philippines. Thence, MTBMLE is a plausible method considering the country's diverse linguistic background. Nonetheless, the Philippines are aware that certain English communication skills have an impact on the country's economy and development. Accordingly, ELT holds a distinct place within the education system that configures through outcomes-based English education. It involves communicative and traditional grammar and more student-centered approaches (cf. Cabigon 2015). The general education curriculum stipulates six up to nine English units per week at the tertiary level. Meanwhile, the choice of methodology is surrendered to tertiary schools to being able to adjust their teaching to the needs and interests of the students. MTBMLE is anchored through English core courses plus communication courses that specify on speaking, writing, and presenting, whereas universities presume to shape English programs by themselves. Universities realize courses in English and the focus is shifted to translingualism to remark cultural and linguistic aspects. (cf. Canilao et al. 2017, 131).

#### 4.2. Comparison of Laotian and Filipino English Language Teaching

Laos and the Philippines were both captured by America, but the interest of America in the two countries differs. On the one hand stands the Philippines, in which America had economic and expansionist interest. On the other hand stands Laos, which served as a battlefield between America and the Soviet Union during Vietnam war even though Laos was officially neutral (Rotondi 2019). The American colonialization of the Philippines foregrounded English and established English-only policies plus the entrenchment of English into the constitution that generate to the fact that L2 learners are adequately proficient, and the majority of the country holds fluency at least to some extent (cf. Turmudi and Hajan 2020, 78-79). At the same time linguistic imperialism ramifies, see Chapter 1.3.. In contrast, Lao students face difficulties in seeing the relevance of English for their development as portrayed in 3.2.3. English proficiency does not carry economic advantages for prospective peasantry. One could have concluded that is why English is less promoted by the government through the declaration of Lao as solitary official language and less attention on English lessons within the curriculum (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 188).

Laos and the Philippines share common ground with their multilingual setting. Ensuing that the imposed usage of English as communication tool contributes positively to English

fluency. That is due to a clear structure of language education that pays off in the Philippines and exhibits in 12.7 % English-speaking Filipino citizens (See Fig. 7) despite diverse vernaculars and the inauguration of MTBMLE, while unilingual education in Lao language leads to enormous problems of ethnic minorities to follow up during the lesson. Consequently, homogenous educational impartment is unearthly. Whensoever language barriers already emerge by the time of basic education, how are Lao students supposed to acquire another foreign language?

Besides, a greater language exposure, promoted through tourism, media, trade, and business process outsourcing<sup>17</sup>, stresses the economic interest that language ability brings with it and therefore the relevance of English that ultimately motivates the learner to become proficient in English. Regarding BPO, the Philippines are attractive for foreign investors and companies according to suitable English proficiency and lower-cost workforce compared to western countries. The emerging success of the call center industry speaks for the settlement of other international companies in the Philippines and justifies English-medium education (cf. Bolton 2012, 23). In contrast, Laos is devoid of language exposure and authentic communication. The underrepresentation of English Language in Laos is also indicated in Figure 6 since no concrete figure could be ascertained. Non-existing English skills can have extensive consequences for the students' future, which are presumably worsened prospects through insufficient English proficiency. Filipino students procure themselves international advantages. They might take on well-paid jobs overseas facilitated through appropriate English proficiency. On that score, they can support their family in the Philippines and ensure prosperity within the country. The development of the Philippines from a former developing country into a threshold country is partly attributable to sufficient English language skills.

Both countries share common ground in offering free education that is supposed to provide accessible education for every citizen. The overall lower economic situation of Laos as in Chapter 2.2. leads to the inability of Lao people to execute their right of education. The main challenges that arise within the Laotian education system are high dropout out rates and repetition rates and negative school attainment. Regarding the multilingual setting that both countries share, Laos is free to take a leaf out of the Philippines' book. MTBMLE is an approach that could sprout in the case of Laos. To introduce Lao students too early into the English language leads to negative school attainment. The attention ought to be on producing primary students that are proficient in their mother-tongue and Lao language as well as reducing school dropouts and focus distinctly on the completion of primary school.

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<sup>17</sup> Business Process Outsourcing is abbreviated BPO.

Thereupon, English should be introduced into the school curriculum once students have a sense for language system from their mother tongue after primary school. The promotion of English by the Lao government must increase in order to improve the significance and importance of English to remain competitive on an international market in a globalized world. Therein, the Philippines display an ELT paradigm that Laos could follow to learn from their joint imperialistic past and make the most out of “ [...] *the white man’s burden* [...] ” (Kipling 1992, 127) to further improve and develop what was being imposed on the countries. The following figures show the difference between various languages in Laos and the Philippines. 12.7 % Filipinos speak English. In comparison to Laos, in which merely 6% of the population speak English or another minority language. This points up variable language levels.

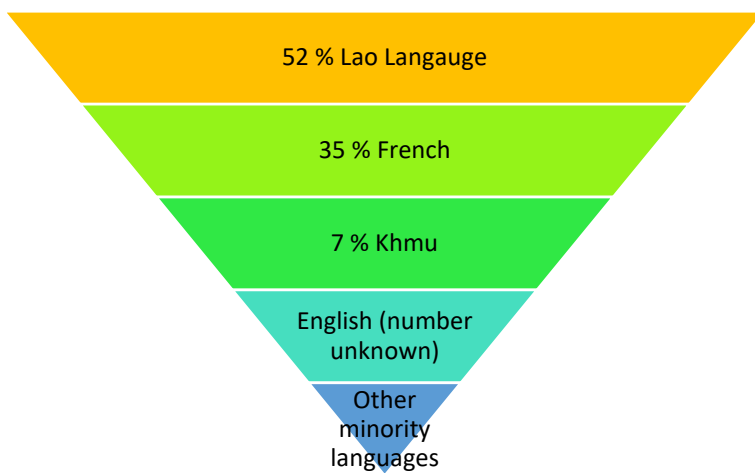


Figure 6 Languages spoken in Laos (cf. Kiprob 2017).

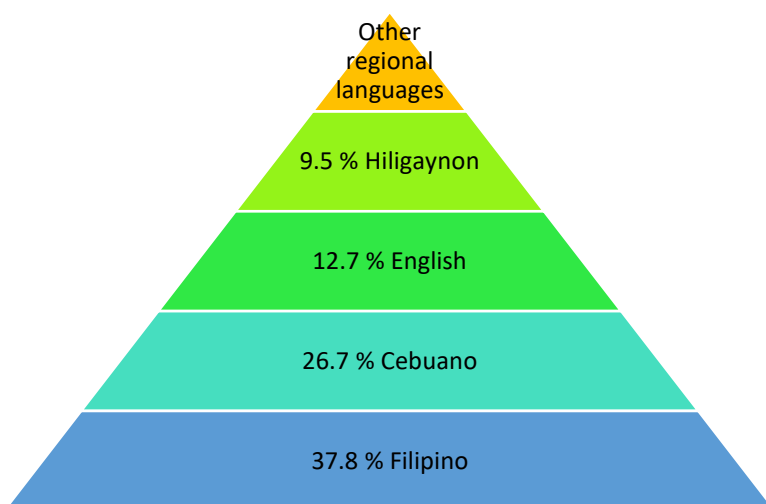


Figure 7 Languages spoken in Philippines (cf. Mangahas 2016).

## 5. Résumé and Future Goals – Understanding Contextual Surroundings

Factors that lead to unequal English proficiency from a Laotian perspective derive on the one hand from extrinsic elements such as school completeness, shortage of resources, rural-urban divide and infrastructure, low-qualified teaching staff, teacher salaries, teacher absenteeism and weak curriculum design, and on the other hand from intrinsic elements. The last chapter shall summarize the main aspects leading to unequal English proficiency in Laos and looks ahead those factors to draw conclusions.

### 5.1. Extrinsic Factors

What can be done to facilitate improved English learning in the Lao classrooms considering **extrinsic factors**? The Lao curriculum must be reconsidered with regards to the students' needs and interests (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 189). The execution of language policy and curriculum lies in the hand of English teachers and teachers must be provided with support on how to develop lesson plans according to updated curricula (cf. Prix 2020, 24). Furthermore, steps must be taken to improve the teacher education system to retain and enhance teacher quality (cf. UNESCO 2014, 5). Due to that the revision of education programs offered in TEIs is advisable and within reach through a change of focus from coursebook-oriented and memorization teaching strategies towards communicative approaches in order to prepare and improve methodology as well as to renounce from ELT merely for passing exams (cf. Jakob 2018, 29). With the result that teachers shall be better equipped for existing working circumstances, as well as the creation of more proficient teachers, who serve as anxiety-free, communicative English language role models (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 189). Multigrade education poses a big challenge on teachers. Lower-experienced and lower-trained teachers carry the most undue burden to adjust their teaching to growing demands and needs of education, especially in rural parts of the country. Teachers lack knowledge of didactics and existing teaching and learning material is scarce or outdated. Therefore the curriculum of TEIs must be reedited to assist teachers (cf. UNESCO 2014, 45).

The relevance of education is reinforced through the enhancement of teacher quality and can be further strengthened by financial assistance (cf. Prix 2020, 24). Incomplete schools need to be provided with learning material, trained teachers, and access to education



through improved school infrastructure. The rural-urban divide issue must be waded into through enhancement of attractive incentives such as sufficient salaries, so that income supplements are not necessary anymore and teachers can be physically present even during harvesting season, as well as to get a hold of reasonable work circumstances, for instance the realization of appropriate pupil-teacher-ratios and for teachers that take on challenges of incomplete schools (cf. Prix 2020, 24-25).

## 5.2. Intrinsic Factors

Linguistic and cultural obstacles, lack of language exposure, FLA and lack of motivation designate the most challenging **intrinsic factors** that influence the students' behavior and ultimately lead to unequable English proficiency in Laos. The classroom environment in general creates and preserves social affiliations. The right emotional climate can enhance students' motivation. The learners' experience in a language classroom can be a cause for anxiety, awkwardness, lack of confidence and social and foreign language anxiety (cf. Dewaele 2011, 4). The cultural understanding of loss of face hinders communicative and active English lessons to build proficiency and Lao students are clammed to speak up to avoid embarrassment (cf. Jakob 2018, 27-28). Creating an anxiety-free environment might be one of the biggest challenges for teachers, especially in the English classroom. The importance of understanding must be underlined here. The individual student's emotion must be validated via empathy by teachers. Moreover, teachers ought to radiate a positive feeling and trust because emotions impact everything we do and motor our actions. The students need to see their teacher communicate in English freely in order to overcome anxiety (cf. Dewaele 2011, 7). Lao English teachers mostly lack native-like proficiency, but it is more important that they represent a communicative role model. For this reason, the future aim needs to be the realization of a positive and anxiety-free learning environment, in which students welcome their mistakes in order to make progress. Beyond the classroom, learning must be encouraged by their family to become aware of the relevance and value of learning English (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 189). Limited opportunities of language exposure and usage of English language work counterproductively towards the relevance of learning English for Lao students. Students do not see their future English-speaking self and its importance as a 21<sup>st</sup> century skill. On that account their motivation to learn English decreases (Ibid.). Once difficulties of linguistic and cultural manner arise additionally, it even fosters demotivation because Lao students are challenged to overcome these difficulties of a language they find harder to learn because of few linguistic and cultural similarities and a

language which is not an absolute necessary skill to acquire in an agricultural society (cf. Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 184-185).

### 5.3. Closing Remarks

Extrinsic and intrinsic factors that lead to unequal English proficiency in Laos work synergistically. Assuming that teachers are not forced to take on second jobs due to a salary increase, the teachers' internal motivation might be promoted. As a result of less worries about livelihood and provision for their family, they are less fatigued, their motivation boosts and they have more time available for lesson planning and preparation. Thus, the quality of English education increases. To eliminate one extrinsic factor exerts influence on intrinsic factors.

Regarding plenty of factors that determine English proficiency output, it is to say that extrinsic factors outweigh intrinsic factors for the moment until the majority of extrinsic factors can be suspended. Although there is boosted motivation on teachers' and students' side, shortage of resources, didactical problems, teacher ability and private circumstances are still present to exacerbate possible English proficiency. Consequently, it must be plead for fair allocation of funds within all sectors of the household of Lao P.D.R. Though, it is easy to say what must be improved, but to identify the issues and problems that lead to unequal English proficiency in Laos is a cautious dip into a future-oriented direction. Despite that execution is something completely different.

Concluding, the context under which teachers must teach and students must learn, are disadvantageous for English language acquisition and the course needs to be altered to achieve the overall goal to disseminate education to the entire population and a system that takes steps against it through research, reevaluation of current strategies and approaching structural problems (cf. Bäcktorp 2007, 27).

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## List of Figures

### Figure 1

McArthur, Tom (1987): *The English languages?* English Today, 3(3). Cambridge: University Press 1987, 9-13. Available online at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078400013511>.

### Figure 2

Own Illustrations after

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### Figure 3

Yano, Yasukata (2009): *The Future of English: Beyond the Kachruvian Three Circle Model?\**. In: Murata, Kumiko; Jenkins, Jennifer (Eds.) (2009): *Global Englishes in*



Asian contexts. Current and future debates. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 208 – 225.

**Figure 4**

Osborne, Milton Edgeworth; Dommen, Arthur J.; Zasloff, Joseph J.; Lafont, Pierre-Bernard; Silverstein, Josef (2020): Laos | History, Flag, Map, Capital, Population, & Facts. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available online at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Laos/Religion>, checked on 01/20/2021.

**Figure 5**

Own source

Ban Phang Heng primary school – English lesson

**Figure 6**

Own illustration after

Kiprop, Joseph (2017): Available online at <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-languages-are-spoken-in-laos.html>, checked on 03/12/2021.

**Figure 7**

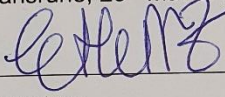
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