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AN INVESTIGATION OF THAI HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PROBLEMS

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Abstract

A way to improve English language teaching is an investigation of students' English language problems. This study therefore explored Thai high school students' English language learning problems. This was a case study, employing a survey design and using a questionnaire as instrument for data collection. The subjects were 104 high school students in Lampang Province, Thailand. The results of this study revealed the following findings. On listening, the students had difficulty in class discussion in English. On speaking, they had trouble with asking questions in English in the classroom. On reading, they could not understand English idioms. On writing, they were unable to finish essay writing within a limited time. On sociocultural perspectives on second language learning, they lacked opportunity to spend time associate with native speakers. On international communication barriers, on oral presentation for a lesson assignment, they rehearsed it only 2-3 times to prepare themselves. Lastly, of all language learning tasks, the most problematic English task was writing. This study is a puzzle to the whole picture. Future inquiry should replicate this study to see the whole picture of this issue.

Keywords: English language problems, questionnaire, survey and Thai high school students,

1. INTRODUCTION

Several studies (e.g. Wong, 1985; Thongsongsee, 1998; Crowe, 1992; Songsangkaew, 2003) revealed that way to improve English language teaching is an investigation of the students' English language problems. Factors that affect language learning strategies and problems include: 1) linguistic problems, 2) sociocultural factors on second language learning, 3) barriers to intercultural and second language communication and 4) teaching/learning strategies.

Linguistic problems are first and foremost important factor. According to Roos (2011), if one is to observe how and where we acquire language form, we will be surprised to learn that most of us have picked up our ability to communicate orally through visual audio and interpersonal means. In other word, we learn to speak though interaction with family and/ or the television. That is not to say that the IQ aspect of language acquisition is not useful. The semantic of language helps the student to be able to write and communicate within a guiding framework. The problem is many students are left feeling limited and afraid of showing their potential or expressing themselves simply because they feel shy of this framework and the fact that the framework can be used as judging their ability to communicate. Although many modern pedagogy tend to focus on students learning through inquiry, experience, and self-expression, it is very important to work within a disciplinary framework that allow for learning to be assessed effectively. Second language learners can also face challenges of feeling a sense of incompletion and fossilization, as found by Mitchell & Myles (1998). In the Thai context, Thongsongsee (1998) investigated linguistic and cultural difficulties encountered by Thai student graduates from American universities. Her findings indicate that psychological and environmental factors such as, a good understanding of the culture of a new environment, and a cross-cultural adaption to new class-room strategies can play and influential role in determining the success of a non-native ESL/EFL learner. In the study, social factors such as being able to make new friends who spoke the native language can also greatly increase success.

Sociocultural factors on second language learning also affect language learning of another language. The social aspects of language acquisition also take in consideration the study of gender, race, religion, age, sex, and other environmental factors. These social factors may eventually determine the outcome and opportunity available for language acquisition, and application. Social factors are also directly related to the division between the various socio-economic classes, which further determines the educational opportunities and resources available for the individual learner. Songsangkaew (2003) studied the language function difficulties experienced by Thai students at tertiary levels attending American Universities. Her finding suggests that although Thai students were able to score a decent grade on their TOEFL, their understanding of grammar and structure did not necessarily transfer into real life situation. According to these students, grammar and structure helps to a certain level, but environmental factors can greatly influence their success at an English speaking University. The two main factors for these challenges are psycho and social linguistically related.

Barriers to intercultural and second language communication also influence language learning and learning strategies. Crowe's study (1992) illustrated that Asian students particularly experienced language problems in writing English as well as speaking. The findings indicated that Asian students rely heavily on rote memorization of grammar rules and structure. His study and observation show that students struggled in making language application transitions from their memories of grammar syntax. They also struggled with cohesion of language usage, both in writing and speaking. This often leads to lack of confidence in their academic ability, and can even result in plagiarism when it comes to written and research based work. The main challenge of learning and acquiring a second language is the lack of opportunities in applying knowledge gained within the classroom, and using it outside in their daily lives. Many students' learning environment and context are limited to the resources provided in the classroom and their learning environment. This leads to a bubble of technical knowledge and limited language ability that creates linguistic specialist, rather than language users (Chumchaiyo, 2002).

Teaching/learning strategies are influential factors. The strategies are commonly used in language learning classroom include grammar translation method (V. Cook, 1991; Chang, 2011), audio lingual method (G.Cook, 2000; Horwitz, 2008), direct method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), silent method (Gattegno, 1971) and whole language method (Horwitz, 2008). The effectiveness of each approach is dependent on the level of the student and the requirement of the design course. As concluded by Harmer (2007), certain methodology that works well with beginner level students may prove to be ineffective with the higher level students. There has been lots of debate in the academic world of teaching on what method are better. To no conclusion, expert now agree that the effectiveness of a learning approach is directly related to context.

Language learning strategies are the key to success and knowing students' problems will help improve their learning strategies. This present study therefore explored how the four factors affect Thai learners' English language problems and their learning strategies that enable them to overcome and effectively deal with some of the challenges mentioned above with the following research questions: What are the English problems perceived by Thai Students?

2. PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to survey Thai high school student' English language problems on four language skills, sociocultural perspectives on second language learning and international communication barriers.

3. METHODS

3.1 Design of the Study

This was a case study employing a survey design. The population was 117 grade 12 students in math and science program at Assumption College Thonburi (ACT). The subjects were 104 high school students in math and science program. This study specifically chose to study this population for four reasons. First, Assumption College is an English-oriented school. The students are more familiar with English as a means of communication in a classroom than other types of school. Second, this study chose Lampang campus as a focus of the study as the campus is located far away from Bangkok, the capital of Thailand which is also the center of education. Thirdly, this study chose the students in math and science program as these students are not language students and the majority of Thai high school students attended math and science. Lastly, this study focused on grade 12 students who were in their final year and, therefore, could

provide conclusive data relating to the purposes of the study. This study aimed at the nature of Thai students' English language problems and their learning strategies. The population served the purposes of the study.

3.2 Instrument

The instrument for data elicitation was a survey questionnaire of rating scales borrowed from a model questionnaire designed by Rebecca Oxford (1990) and adapted by Rubin, J., & Thompson, I. (1994) which has been used by many researchers over the years. In 1990, Rebecca Oxford published a "Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know" which included the "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" or "SILL", a questionnaire model which is used by many researchers over the years.

The questionnaires responding to the two research questions consisted of 3 sections as follows: demographic data, English language problems, and learning strategies. Section 1 or demographic data was mainly about individuals and academic characteristics including: age, gender, fields of study, and prior experience in English language learning and teaching. Section 2 deals with English language problems regarding to the four language skills, socio-cultural aspects on second language learning skills, and barrier to intercultural communication skills. Section 3 includes these learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, social, and teaching and learning.

For validity and reliability check, the borrowed questionnaire was verified by three judges for the effectiveness of the questionnaire before employing in the study.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected during the last week before their graduation (February 17, 2014). Means and standard deviation (SD) were used for data analysis.

4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The number of returned responses of the study was 104 out of 117, representing 89 percent of the target population. The result of the study is presented based on the research question: What are the English problems perceived by Thai Students? The results of the first research question report problems on the following skills and aspects: listening, speaking, reading, writing, sociocultural perspectives on second language learning and barriers to intercultural communication.

4.1 Problems on Listening Skills

Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Listening Skills

Listening Skills	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I can participate in class discussions in English.	2.88	0.86	Medium
2. I can understand a native speaker speaking at normal speed.	3.03	0.86	Medium
3. I can understand comments given by native English speakers.	3.10	0.85	Medium
4. I can understand classroom lectures in English.	3.17	0.85	Medium
5. I feel comfortable in listening to native speaker students or teachers in the classroom.	3.24	0.90	Medium
Average	**3.08**	**0.86**	**Medium**

Table 1 indicated that the most serious listening problem was that the students cannot participation in class discussion in English (mean = 2.88).

4.2 Problems on Speaking Skills

Table 2 Mean and Standard Deviation of Speaking Skill Problems

Speaking Skills	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I can ask questions in English in the classroom.	2.88	0.86	Medium
2. A native speaker of English understands my English pronunciation.	2.92	0.87	Medium
3. I can have a casual conversation in English.	2.96	0.84	Medium
4. I can perform academic presentation in English in the classroom.	3.01	0.83	Medium
5. I feel comfortable talking with a native speaker instructor in the classroom.	3.15	0.90	Medium
Average	**2.98**	**0.86**	**Medium**

Table 2 indicated that the most serious speaking problem was that the students cannot ask questions in English in the classroom (mean = 2.88).

4.3 Problems on Reading Skills

Table 3 Mean and Standard Deviation of Reading skills

Reading Skills	Means	SD	Interpretation
1. I can understand English idioms.	2.63	0.89	Medium
2. I can guess the meaning of new vocabulary.	2.79	0.87	Medium
3. I can explain the main idea and summary of a passage	2.86	0.85	Medium
4. I can read a magazine in English.	3.06	0.98	Medium
5. I can read academic textbooks in English.	3.31	0.94	Medium
Average	**2.93**	**0.91**	**Medium**

Table 3 indicated that the most serious reading problem was that the students cannot understand English idioms (mean = 2.63).

4.4 Problems on Writing Skills

Table 4 Mean and Standard Deviation of Writing skills

Writing Skills	Means	SD	Interpretation
1. I can write an essay within a limited time.	2.21	1.00	Low
2. I can write an academic paper in English.	2.29	1.12	Low
3. I can use grammatical rules perfectly in completing writing assignment.	2.35	1.01	Low
4. I can write reports, projects, letters, and class assignments in English.	2.40	0.99	Low
5. I can paraphrase English passages.	2.47	0.88	Low
Average	**2.34**	**1.02**	**Low**

Table 4 indicated that the most serious writing problem was that the students cannot finish an essay writing within a limited time (mean = 2.21).

4.5 Problems on Sociocultural Perspectives on Second Language Learning

Table 5 Mean and Standard Deviation of Problems on Sociocultural Perspectives on Second Language Learning

Sociocultural perspectives on second language learning	Means	SD	Interpretation
1. I spend my free time to associate with native speakers.	2.47	1.10	Low
2. I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English.	2.74	0.97	Medium
3. I like to be in an English speaking society.	2.88	1.04	Medium
4. I try to learn the cultures of the place where English is spoken.	3.09	0.89	Medium
5. I like to make new friends especially with English native speakers.	3.11	1.14	Medium
Average	**2.86**	**1.03**	**Medium**

Table 5 indicated that the most serious problem of sociocultural perspectives on second language learning was that the students do not have an opportunity to spend time associate with native speakers (mean = 2.47).

4.6 Problems on Barrier to Intercultural Communication

Table 6 Mean and Standard Deviation of Problems on Barrier to Intercultural Communication

Barriers to intercultural communication	Means	SD	Interpretation
1. When I have an oral presentation for a lesson assignment, I rehearse it only 2-3 times to prepare myself.	2.55	0.97	Medium
2. Mr. Thomas Cook is an American. He never explains the lesson when his friends have questions. I don't think I can stereotype other Americans to be like Mr. Thomas Cook.	2.60	0.98	Medium
3. When I communicate with an English native speaker, I am never ashamed about my ability to use the English language.	2.66	0.95	Medium
4. I can adapt myself within a new environment/culture.	2.98	0.88	Medium
Average	**2.70**	**0.95**	**Medium**

Table 6 indicated that the most serious problem of barrier to international communication was that when the students had an oral presentation for a lesson assignment, they rehearsed it only 2-3 times to prepare themselves (mean = 2.55).

4.7 Comparison of English Language Problems/Tasks

Table 7 The Five Most Problematic English Tasks

Strategies	Means	Problem type	Interpretation
1. I can write an essay within a limited time.	2.21	Writing	Low
2. I spend my free time to associate with native speakers.	2.47	Sociocultural	Low
3. When I have an oral presentation for a lesson assignment, I rehearse it only 2-3 times to prepare myself.	2.55	Barriers	Medium
4. I can understand English idioms.	2.63	Reading	Medium
5. I can participate in class discussions in English.	2.88	Listening	Medium

Table 7 indicated that the most problematic English tasks was writing (mean = 2.21).

5. CONCLUSION

The study revealed the following findings. On listening, the students had difficulty in class discussion in English. On speaking, they had trouble with asking questions in English in the classroom. On reading, they could not understand English idioms. On writing, they were unable to finish essay writing within a limited time. On sociocultural perspectives on second language learning, they lacked opportunity to spend time associate with native speakers. On international communication barriers, on oral presentation for a lesson assignment, they rehearsed it only 2-3 times to prepare themselves. Lastly, of all language learning tasks, the most problematic English task was writing.

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