Using Grounded Theory to Gain an Insight into How Thai Students Learn English

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอมุมมองต่อโลกที่นำมาใช้ในการเลือกทำงานวิจัยสองแบบคือ การวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ และการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ในบทความนี้ผู้เขียนนำเสนอทฤษฎีที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพที่ชื่อว่า Grounded Theory โดยเน้นให้เห็นลักษณะเด่นของวิธีการ หลักการ และเหตุผลว่าทำไมจึงเลือกใช้วิธีการนี้ร่วมกับ Constant Comparative Method ในงานที่ชื่อว่า "ประสบการณ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาในมหาวิทยาลัยไทย: กรณีศึกษา" ในตอนที่สอง ผู้เขียนบรรยายรายละเอียดว่าวิธีนี้ช่วยให้ได้ข้อมูลเชิงลึกซึ่งอยู่ในรูปประสบการณ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาได้อย่างไร และอธิบายเทคนิคในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลและการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลอย่างละเอียด ในตอนท้ายของบทความ ผู้เขียนกล่าวถึงวิธีการแก้ปัญหาเรื่องความน่าเชื่อถือและความตรงของงานนี้ รวมทั้งสรุปให้เห็นว่างานที่ยากที่สุดในกระบวนการวิจัยแบบนี้คือการที่ต้องใช้เวลามากในการวิเคราะห์ย้อนไปย้อนมาเพื่อให้มั่นใจในประเด็นที่สรุปได้จากข้อมูลและสิ่งที่ทำให้เกิดความพึงพอใจในการทำวิจัยคือเป็นกระบวนการเรียนรู้ของนักวิจัยเองอย่างแท้จริง

Abstract

This paper first introduces two major research orientations: quantitative and qualitative, based on two different world views. Then, Grounded Theory as a format of qualitative research is described with its highlighted features together with the presenter's rationale why Grounded Theory with the Constant Comparative Method was chosen as the main analytical tool for the study entitled "English Learning Experiences of Students Enrolled at a Thai University: a Case Study". The second part of the paper deals with how Grounded Theory is used in the study to gain an insight into the experiences of Thai students in learning English. Data collection and data analysis techniques are

revealed to support how this insight is derived with the application of Grounded Theory. The problems of reliability and validity and how they were addressed in the study by the researcher are discussed. At the end of the paper, the hardest job in the research process is found to be the amount of time spent until data saturation on such a study and the elements of satisfaction include a deep learning process for the researcher herself.

Introduction

Many people believe that the two major worldviews are quantitative and qualitative approaches but it is cautioned that these two approaches are not direct dichotomies. Creswell (2009, pp. 6-12) states that it is a general orientation about the world and about the nature of research that a research holds and he proposes three alternative strategies of inquiry-quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Quantitative strategies include survey research and experimental research. Qualitative strategies consist of ethnography, Grounded Theory, case studies, phenomenology research and narrative research. Mixed methods means strategies can be merged in a study. For those who believe that there is unique truth out there, the data need to be collected and analyzed systematically and statistically. If the researcher wants to dig deep into life stories, feelings and attitudes of their research participants, they need more instruments or approaches than statistics.

How did I come to know the Grounded Theory?

Before I made my decision about which approach to take, my supervisor asked me to read two books by Glaser and Strauss:

1) Glaser, BG & Strauss, AL 1967, *The discovery of grounded theory—strategies for qualitative research,* Aldine Publishing Company, United States of America.

2) Strauss, A & Corbin, J 1990, *Basics of qualitative research—grounded theory—procedures and techniques,* Sage Publications, Inc., United States of America.

I followed her suggestion without asking a question. The books were very interesting to me. Immediately, I found that Grounded Theory was the technique for my study! Glaser and Strauss (1967) showed me that qualitative research suited my study better because I aimed at collecting experiences of my students.

What is Grounded Theory?

According to Wiersma, the main characteristic of Grounded Theory is the 'process of inductive data analysis.' Grounded Theory, as its name suggests, is a theory grounded in the data rather than based on some priori-constructed idea, notion or system. Nunan (1992) called it the 'data-first' approach. Concept analysis leads to an emerging grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 23) explains that Grounded Theory is:

..one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and the theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge.

Glaser and Strauss (1967, pp. 101-106) popularized Grounded Theory which incorporated the use of 'the Constant Comparative Method of Analysis''. The main goal is for the researcher to break

away from her own bias due to being one actor in the study. However, creativity and theoretical sensitivity must be used in analyzing the data. The researcher asks questions that will lead to understanding the phenomenon such as "What's happening?", "What's going on?" and "What does it mean?" Bogdan and Bilken (1982, p.70) suggest steps in the Constant Comparative Method as first, data collection, then, categorization but the process does not stop there; categories are studied and accounted for while new categories may be formed out of existing data. After that data is studied until patterns of relationships emerge. Finally, the most important aspect of the approach is how emerging key concepts are related, interpreted and defined. An inductive grounded theory that emerges is from the phenomenon investigation.

In summary, Grounded Theory is a research method that is appropriate for a study that deals with huge numbers of raw data which is needed to be analyzed and the direction of the study is from 'data' to 'theory.'

My thesis is designed according to the general construct of Grounded Theory, specifically using Constant Comparative Method for data analysis. It investigated a phenomenon—how students learn English, how they managed to learn it and in coping with it, what the obstacles, their reactions and their viewpoints are. How the data is analyzed with Constant Comparative Method is part of the process is represented in the following flow chart.

The Data Analysis Process
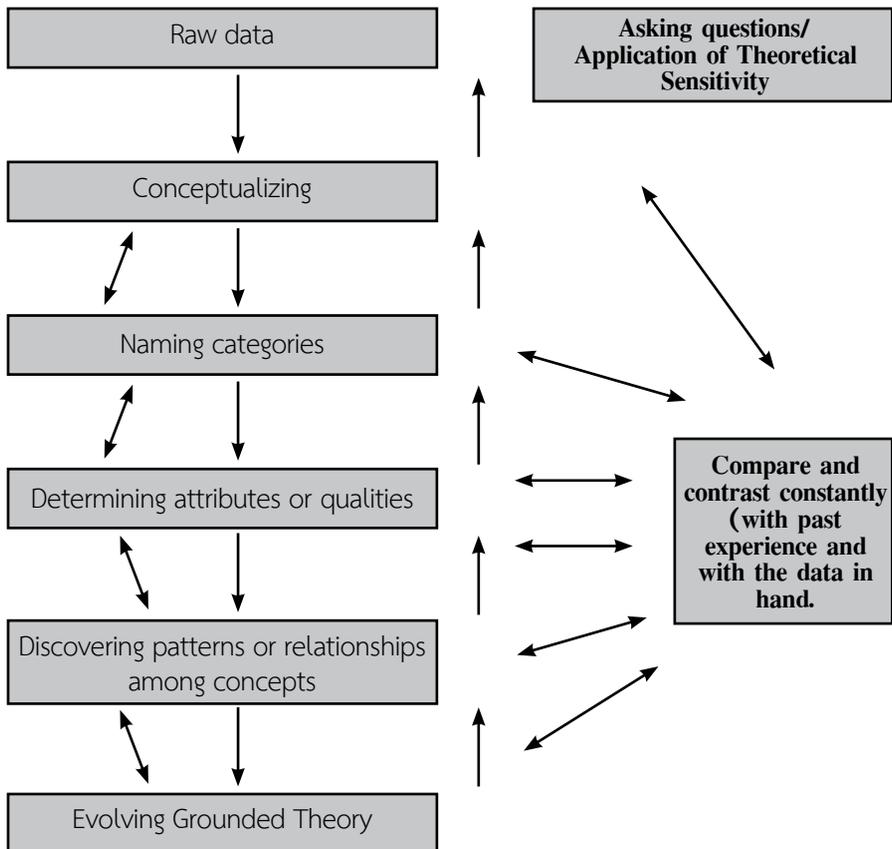
Wiersma (1995, p.217) defines coding as "a process of organizing data and obtain data reduction" and "the process by which qualitative researchers see what they have in the data." When the core or central category emerges, the researcher realizes what his or her research is all about. There is no short cut through the process as the researcher must work back and forth from the raw data to forming a theory as shown in the data analysis process. In my study, there were times I had to go back to literature review after data analysis and there were times

I went through the themes and the concepts that had emerged once again until various patterns came up. Through Constant Comparative Method and asking questions again and again, the researcher eventually arrives at a data-driven theory. The work is done back and forth until saturation of information is reached because there are no longer new concepts to be formed.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Richard (2003, pp. 268-281) point out that analysis in Grounded Theory is composed of three major types of coding—open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

Open coding is the process of breaking down: comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data (single words/line by line/ sentences/ paragraphs and entire documents).

The following is an example of open coding of how raw data is categorized.

Nov:	I'm tense when O and A (classmates who can speak English well) spoke in class. I suddenly lost my confidence and became tense.
Interviewer:	Why is it so?
Nov:	I can't explain. Everyone else in class was also tense. When O and A spoke, nobody else continued on the same topic.
Interviewer:	Why?
Nov:	I felt tense. Others who can speak well also stopped participating and remained quiet.

Interviewer:	What about the atmosphere in class?
Nov:	Tense. For me, it is some sort of fear. This is common but we must know how to manage it—fight or fright. Then, one day there was a chance for me to give a presentation alone in class. I tried my best because it was the only chance. I did well and I got back my confidence. I used to be the one who created fun atmosphere in class but O and A already did that all the time. I chose to remain quiet. Y, another friend also chose to be quiet when the topic was "Buddhism" although he knows more than others about it and can speak English well.

The information leads me to "Competition in Class Category" especially when there are a number of able students. Between cooperation and competition, they would rather choose competition which was displayed in the form of other students' tenseness and refusal to join the discussion resulting in disturbing silence and tension in the class atmosphere.

Axial coding is a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways by making connections between categories (a classification of concepts). Axial coding enables the researcher to relate similar categories derived from raw data and establish a theme or a concept. An example on "Competition in Class Category" is shown here to explain how a core theme or concept, which is the "relationship with peers", is derived. Participants talked about various situations where they felt affected by competition of which the interview data could be patterned and categorized as follows:

Recurring Properties and Dimensional range	Categories from Open Coding	Themes/Concepts during Axial Coding
Competition is negative	Competition: Negative and covert type	Relationship with peers/peers
Why they can do it, why can't I?	Feel helpless	
Some good students are too selfish to help others.	Become selfish	
Friends had to improve us. If they ignore us, that means they are not helping.	Become selfish	
Some even lied to their friends that they haven't done their reading.	Hide information	
If you miss a class, no one will tell you what was taught and what homework was given.	Hide information	
If I have lower marks than my friends, I feel stressed as the grade is based on the marks I have.	Compare with others and feel stressed	
90% of Thai students like to compare themselves with other people.	Compare with others and feel stressed	
If the teacher compares us with a good student saying how come you are not as good as that person, we go against that person for sure.	Go against the teacher's pet	
Losing self confidence because other students are better	Lose self-confidence	
Competitions exist among friends.	Competition	
If I talk to the teacher all the time, friends won't like it.	Occupy the teacher is seen as bad.	
Competition affects relationship.	Relationship affected	

Selective coding is the process of selecting the themes/concepts emerged from axial coding, systematically relating them and validating their relationships. Validating one's theory against the data completes its grounding. One central theme emerges as a result of selective coding. In this study, the "peers" factor is listed together with seven other factors that emerged in the axial coding step: the role of English in the globalized world, purposes of learning, the mysterious element of English, the teacher, the learner, class activities and assessment.

In this study, I dealt with approximately 36-hour-long interview data which resulted in about 800 pages of transcribed data. To make it easy for me to analyse this voluminous data manually, in the open coding step I categorized the data thought by thought by putting the properties or the dimensional range of the same category on strips of paper, so I knew what thoughts they were and what categories each interviewee had made. Of course, I started from the first interviewee and continued working in this way in order. In the end, thoughts of the same categories (from the 12 interviewees) were grouped together in bunches. During these steps, I went back and forth to ensure that I appropriately used "theoretical sensitivity". I occasionally left the data in order to come back to it with a new eye.

What are major factors related to the Grounded Theory?

Seliger and Shohamy (1989, pp. 22-24) point out that research in second language varies according to the circumstances under which the research is conducted, the methodology used in the research and the tools used to study second language. Research design and methodology of a particular study depends on the conditions specific to it. Therefore, the choice of Grounded Theory for the study depends

on its primary background conditions: being qualitative in its natural setting, taking a case study approach and interpretation of interview data.

The Constant Comparative Method requires that the researcher possess creativity and theoretical sensitivity. With creativity, the researcher can spot the unusual in the data. Creativity enables the researcher to see how data categorization can be done. In order to maintain a scientific process despite allowing creativity to work with the data, Strauss and Corbin (1998, pp. 44-47) suggest that the researcher does the following:

• Periodically step back and ask 'what's going on here?' to prevent inaccurate data analysis
• Maintain an attitude of skepticism, which means never accepting categories or explanations as facts right away
• Alternate between collecting and analysing data and ensure a systematic and precise system of coding.

Theoretical sensitivity is another vital component besides creativity. It refers to "a personal quality of the researcher—an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data—the ability to recognize what is important in data and to give it meaning (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pp. 41, 46). Theoretical Sensitivity comes from three main sources: literature, professional experience and personal experience. When a researcher is with the data all the time by reading it, professional experience and personal experience of the researcher come into play and thus the researcher can see the interconnectedness of the categories/concepts involved.

In summary, the research method provided in-depth information and personal significance to the participants. I was an instrumental factor in the context and a large quantity of information was obtained through three interviews of each research participant interview conducted at approximately one month intervals. At interviews, I tried to reduce bias as much as I could by keeping field notes and also taping the interviews. The journals revealed the thoughts of the participants and me about experiences of teaching and learning English.

The Study

Information for the study is derived from two sources.

Group 1: People

This group is necessary for different functions. They interact to contribute their experiences to the knowledge of learning English in Thailand.

1. My own experience of being both the learner and the teacher as theoretical sensitivity element, "researcher insights" (Wiersma, 1995, p.220)
2. The research participants as the main contributors of data for analysis and interpretation, principal source of information
3. Volunteer professionals in the field of teaching English for contribution of feedback and validation of categories, acting as peer debriefers.

Group 2: Documentation

Different types of documents were used. For literature review, books, journal articles, research reports and websites were referred to. Taped interviews and journals as additional data were analysed for an evolving data-driven theory.

Through the voluntary system adopted, 15 students applied to be research participants and all of them were taken in although only 12 were sufficient in order to guard against population loss later. Criticism about selection of research participants is that when the voluntary system is adopted, it may be hard to prevent bias and to assure that these students represent all the population at Walailak University. In a qualitative research, representative sampling cannot be done. A qualitative approach is employed to capture the experiences and the thought of the research participants in order to understand the social phenomenon in a cultural context. Qualitative research is very "researcher-dependent" (Wiersma, 1995, p.218) and the researcher perspectives are highly influential in qualitative research (Wiersma, 1995, p.219). As a result, that students volunteered to be research participants is a chosen method in this research project. Furthermore, qualitative research allows for high subjectivity. The most important features have shifted from systematic population sampling to systematic coding and grouping of related concepts. However, to avoid compromising the researcher and the research, research participants needed to meet the following criteria:

1. Students who were studying one course of English during the data collection period so that they would be stimulated to think about their experiences in learning English, which they were expected to narrate during interviews.

2. Students were not in any of the researcher's classes to avoid issues surrounding relative power relations
3. Three students from each year, that is, Year 1 to Year 4 were included in this project.

All these students could not represent all different groups of students. The strengths of this research study are in the rich "lived" experiences of reach participant, which may in no way be the same. I wish to listen to their voices because their voices are usually too soft to be heard. Each of them is a case study in itself and together the twelve case studies make up a large institutional case study.

Problems confronted by researchers

If the research is examined by people whose major worldview is positivist, not constructivist, this study will face criticism of problems of validity and reliability and generalizability.

Generalizability of the study is part of the significance. The study only reveals the phenomenon within its scope, not beyond it and generalizations cannot be made. However, this study did not intend to statistically generate its findings as a solution to other cases facing similar problems by presenting itself as a "sample". According to Stake (1995, pp. xi, xiii), a qualitative study like this is a study of the "peculiarity and complexity." Stake believes that generalizability of the study is embedded in "particularization", not "generalization". He says:

> We take a particular case and come to know it well,
> not primarily as to how it is different from others but what
> it is, what it does.

(1995, p. 8)

Stake (1995 p. 85) calls this type of generalizations "naturalistic generalizations" and defines it as "conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as it happened to themselves". Readers of the study will make their own generalizations for their vicarious experience. Hamilton and Ghatala (1981, cited in Stake 1995, p. 85) uses the term "naturalistic generalizations" to refer to "understandings that are private". Stake (1995, p. 99) defines the case study researcher as "the agent of new interpretation, new knowledge, and new illusion, sometimes pointing to what to believe, sometimes facilitating reader understandings that exceed the comprehension of the researcher."

Richards (2003, pp. 8-9) accepts the qualitative inquiry (QI) as one approach to research in the TESOL field based on three reasons: first, it explores the complexities of our immensely complicated social world; second, it is a person-centred enterprise, which is appropriate to work in language teaching and: third, the transformative potential for the researcher by the impact of the research is expected. Senior (2006, p. 16) agrees that this type of research is expected to produce results that those who encounter them will make sense of them and that it is not the responsibility of the researchers to prove that the validity of the findings.

Another obvious problem is certainly the amount of time consumed by using Grounded Theory as the researcher has to start working from tremendous amount of collected data and go through the reduction process of the data analysis stage. However, the rich 'lived' stories that research participants reveal are sources of enjoyment. The researcher learned more than what was necessary for the study. Long-lasting

personal relationships were established. For this study, the data-driven theory that emerged was:-

The main research question is
• What can students tell us, in Thai, about their English as a Foreign Language learning experience at a regional Thai university?

The contributing research questions are
1. What are the students' English language goals?
To what extent do students believe they are successful?
Students shape their personal goals, while institutional goals follow the national aim of building language skills. These two types of goals are to merge. To succeed in language learning, a learner should be driven by his/her personal goal having the national goal in the background. If Thailand (the national level) is not successful in language learning and teaching, there may be a gap in the individual students' goals.
2. What kind of curriculum content, teaching and learning processes (including assessment) have been offered to the students?
Do the students perceive these as effective?
The major part of students' foreign language learning experience is obtained from a classroom. From an institutional perspective, if inefficiency and ineffectiveness exist in the system, it is possible that curriculum content and the teaching and learning process may not be appropriate to Thai students. Or they are not properly designed despite the fact that English language learning and teaching is an advanced area with a variety of approaches to choose from. Assessment is another area deserving our attention. What is the definition of "good in English"? How performance is assessed and what are keys indicators of "success"? On the other hand, students

themselves may not try to learn or know how to learn. Certainly, learning from the research participants will be most useful.

3. To what extent are these students self-directed learners?

To what extent do they feel in control of their learning?

It is undeniable that success in language learning comes from the learner's willingness to learn. Being a self-directed learner makes one an independent and life-long learner. On the other hand, the general poor English ability of Thai students indicates that a big gap may be that our students may not know how to learn.

4. What are the students' beliefs and ideas about what constitutes effective English language teaching?

What influences do students identify as important in their English language learning?

Mastering English involves the right choice of learning approaches. The students' beliefs and ideas about effective English language teaching influence this choice. Some approaches make the learners always dependent on their teachers and the textbooks, while others make the learners progress rapidly on their own.

At axial coding stage, classroom learning experiences are found to be influenced by the role of English in the globalized world which determine the purposes of learning of each student which in turn shape the expectations of classroom learning but are subject to how the five factors (the mysterious element of the English language, the teacher, the learner, peers, classroom activities and assessment) interact. The result of classroom interaction of these factors will be both pleasant and unpleasant learning experiences. The following figure shows the interconnectedness of the involved factors.

The Role of English in the Globalized World
⇩
Achieving the purposes of learning
⇩
Classroom Learning Experiences
- The Teacher
- The Learner
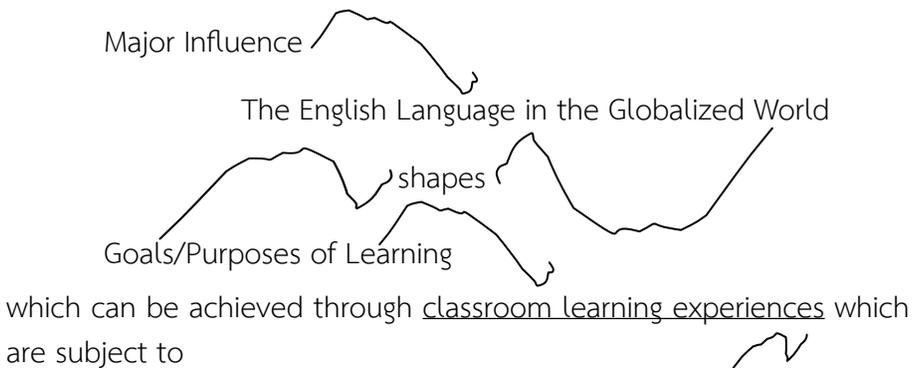- The Peer Group
- Class Activities
- Assessment
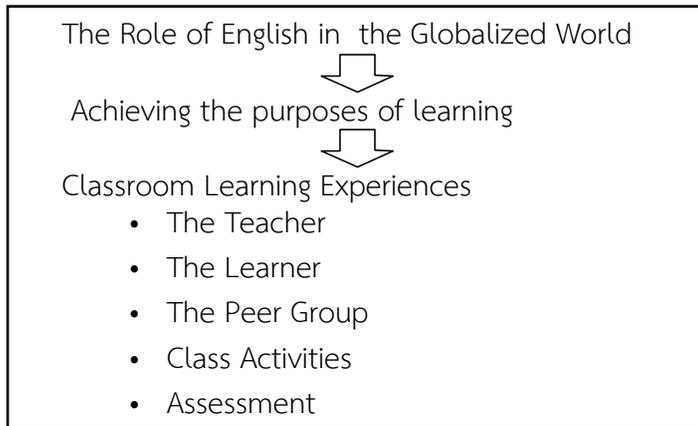
The above figure illustrates the interrelationship between achieving the purposes of learning and classroom experiences. Each student is influenced by the global context of the classroom and he/she herself as the main drive towards success. While each student is fully aware how important English is and why English should be learned, classroom experiences indicate that there are factors that may encourage or discourage learning.

Selective coding identifies motivation (initiating and sustaining) as the central concept or category in this study. Indeed, the research is all about motivation in all forms—intrinsic/ instrumental, extrinsic/ integrative, or in different terms, initiating and sustaining. Motivation is the process or the element the learner needs to have in order to produce good learning with the learner in the centre to control other major interacting factors. With motivation emerging as the core category, data analysis is completed. Motivation is the core category because it casts its influence at every stage of the learning process and it is the main element at stake for successful learning.

The following figure shows the interconnectedness of major themes and a resulting model of situated English language learning in Thailand. Yet, motivation in the Thai classroom requires a specific definition that

matches the Thai teaching and learning environment and in this specific environment, it is encapsulated in the term "the Heart Drive" or "Suk Jai" in Thai, the learning condition in which the learner hopes to learn in a "non-threatening, fun and relaxed atmosphere" supported mainly by the people in the classroom: the teacher and his/her peer group in order to tackle the difficulty of the English Language. As indicated by the study, "the Heart Drive" or "Suk Jai" in Thai is a truly motivating factor for the Thai learners of English. It is similar to what Dornyei (2001, p. 2) describes:

- Motivation is one of the most aspects of the human mind and to both cognition and affect.

Major Influence

The English Language in the Globalized World

shapes

Goals/Purposes of Learning

which can be achieved through <u>classroom learning experiences</u> which are subject to

All of which affect learner motivation (the Heart Drive)

☐ The Mysterious Element of English
☐ The Teacher
☐ The Learner
☐ The Peer Group
☐ Class Activities
☐ Assessment

The framework clearly indicates that for successful learning to happen in the Thai classroom context, the seven axioms must interact in a positive manner. The learner is central to learning but he or she is heavily influenced by the key factor outside the classroom—perception about English. How it is seen, especially through globalization? English has changed from a school subject to study through a means of communication with the world outside. Although it can be said that each learner can develop his/her orientation about language learning (belief, value and essence), there have been similar sets of expectations in classroom English language learning for most people. Once the learner's purposes of learning have been established, he/she goes on through the learning process with participating people (the teacher and peers) in a classroom environment governed by specific factors such as classroom activities and assessment. All the classroom factors have potential to encourage or discourage learning by motivating or de-motivating the learner.

If students are encouraged to go on studying English by their "heart drive", nurtured by the teachers, they will certainly become successful English learners.

Nunan (1990, p. 176) claims that the learners can drive themselves to success in language learning and that the attitudes and expectations of the learners may be as equally important as specification of the official curriculum. Brown (1994, p. 20) calls the methods that the learner employs to internalize and to perform in the language the Principle of Strategic Investment. He says:

> Successful mastery of the language will be due to a large extent to a learner's own personal 'investment' of time, effort and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language.

Conclusion

In my experience, the hardest job for the data-driven theory research is the data analysis part because that is when the research has to depend on this theory sensitivity to come up with appropriate catagories. It takes time and effort but the effort is worthwhile. That is truly our research attempt. Elements of satisfaction are the understandings of students' delight and misery in the English class, what they see as meaningful and supportive of their English learning and on the other hand, all the hindrances. In-depth interviews take the research to life stories which are true but dramatic. These stories are often hidden in the research participants. Grounded Theory helps to bring it out into the open. Secondly, doing research using Grounded Theory approach helps me to transform myself. I see my students with more sympathy that they have to learn a foreign language that is very different from the mother tongue. Listening to their stories, I had an opportunity to analyze myself as an English language learner. Being an interviewer in this type of research helps me to develop a more watchful eye and become a better observer of a phenomenon in investigation.

My message to others who may be interested in doing qualitative research is that the researcher needs to be patient because this type of research requires a long time to complete because you deal with voluminous data. My personal belief is that it is good for English teachers who usually have a watchful eye over what is happening in their classes. Case-study research would be a good choice too.

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