

Learning English of Thai Tertiary Students: From Learners' Recounts and Experiences



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Doi : 10.14456/jmcupeace.2017.21

Abstract

This study investigates English learning as experienced and perceived by Thai university students majoring in Business English. Taking a social perspective of language learning and by adopting an interpretive research inquiry, this study aims to broaden research into second language learning by exploring the learners' views of learning English in the classroom and within the wider social context of university.

293 students participated in the study. A questionnaire survey and focus group interviews were the forms of data collection. Findings from the study indicate that the learners did not seem to have clear conceptions of their experiences of learning English and issues that affected them as learners and their learning English. The learners appeared to believe in participating actively in their learning and constructing knowledge with their English teacher and peers. The learners also indicated supportive features of school experiences where opportunities for English language use outside of the classroom seemed sufficient.

The implications from the study suggest that English language teachers need to reconceptualise learners and English language learning in the attempt to provide learning experiences that would help the learners become effective English language users.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Thai Tertiary Students; Learning Experiences

Introduction

The enhanced role of English in recent years has constantly called for either major or minor changes to meet the demand of the use and usage of English in the country. According to Todd (2006), English is widely used in various domains of life such as the business sector, the education arena, and the tourism industry. As Foley (2005) describes how the English language is used in the Thai context at present, “The paradigm has shifted and Thais are using English mainly with other non-native speakers of English, and only to a lesser extent with native speakers”.

Given the arrival of the ASEAN community in 2015 and the accumulation of intercultural encounters in the region, the importance of enhancing learners’ ability to communicate effectively with other members of the community has increasingly been in a central focus to every party involved in English Language Teaching (ELT).

Although there have been several attempts to reform the whole ELT practices, most Thai students still lack both linguistic and communicative competence (Foley, 2005). Most apparent has been documented in the average mean scores of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), suggesting that Thailand has scored relatively lower than the three other countries: Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The lack of success in the teaching and learning of English in the Thai context is wide ranging and complex in nature. In fact, challenges to improve learners’ both linguistic and communicative competence are rather multifaceted and caused by a number of variables (Kongpetch, 2004; Wiriyachitra, 2002). These might include teaching overloads (Wongsothorn et al., 2003), inadequate teaching materials (Foley, 2005) and students’ lack of opportunity to practice spoken English both inside and outside the classroom (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

The main concern in English education in Thailand is to provide learning experiences that would help learners become proficient English language users in a country where English seems to carry high social and economic values. However, it would appear that while the government, the public and the education system strive to improve the quality of English education in the country, the debate has been on issues other than learning itself.

Learners who are in fact at the heart of the matter have not been consulted and therefore insights into the issues concerned with learning English remain unclear. With a focus on understanding experiences in learning English of Thai university students, the objectives of this study are to investigate the perceptions of Thai EFL tertiary students on

how they perceive themselves as learners of English as well as the importance and status of learning English in their current and future lives. Also, the study attempts to explore the experiences that learners identify as having an influence on their learning English focusing on aspects of the classroom learning environment and socio-cultural factors.

Literature Review

From a social perspective, it seems that language learning is not a simple matter of cognitive processes. Instead, language learning is partly emotional, and seems predominantly social. Therefore, to account for language learning, and, in particular, to account for learners' success or failure in the second language, there is a need to focus not only on the language learners as whole persons and social beings, but at the same time, consider how they interact with the different social forces in their learning environment as it appears that the context in which development and learning take place is crucial and defining.

Learning a Second Language in Context

In focusing on issues related to second language learning in context, two separate but interrelated areas are to be discussed. These are meant to illustrate how the context affects language learning, and at the same time, how it might embody the views of learning.

Firstly, while a second language may be taught in formal contexts such as classrooms, in circumstances where the second language has a key role in society, it can also be learned informally outside these formal contexts. Within SLA, it has in fact been recognised that natural learning outside institutions is more effective for learning a language. This is because it is found that most successful classroom learners are those who have had exposure to language in the natural setting (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). In this respect, it is important to discern the differences between learning a second language at the university and learning a second language outside of it. Secondly, based on the notion that teaching does not necessarily lead to learning (Nunan, 1989; van Lier, 1988), it is also important to focus on some research findings from classroom-based

studies that provide insights into what learners actually achieve in the classroom through their interactions with the teacher, peers in the classroom and the learning activities.

Overall, it appears that learners do not simply develop a second language in the classroom. Allwright (1999) asserts learners may have developed their dispositions to learning through other sources outside the classroom. These arguments indicate that the learners' classroom experiences cannot be separated from their experiences, personal engagements and investments outside the language classroom (Candlin and Mercer, 2001). In order to discern the learners' wider experiences, it is important to consider the influences which exist within the social and cultural practices outside the language classroom as well.

Influences on language learning from wider social and cultural contexts

The educational institution can influence second language learning in several ways. It can influence the activity of learning through the tacit rules within the professional-academic culture for teacher and learner behavior (Holliday, 1994) and it can also influence how the learners learn through its organizational conditions, circumstances as well as cultures (Hopkins, 2001; Breen, 2001).

Learners' Perspectives within SLA Research

In recent years, researchers within SLA advocate that to understand the process of language learning, we need to look at the view of the learners. McGroarty (1998) believes that learners' point of views and the teacher's and/or researcher's viewpoints are pivotal in understanding the second language learning process. Thus, investigating learners' experiences through their own perspectives can provide valuable insights into the understanding of how learners learn, and how they may be affected by various learning experiences.

Background and Research Orientations

Research into learners' experiences of learning a second language started in the early seventies when concerns in the field of second language learning and teaching shifted from the methods of teaching to learner characteristics and their possible influence on the process of acquiring a second language (Wenden, 1987). An early study by Rubin (1975) looks at the experiences of learners in the language classroom in terms of the strategies and techniques that good learners use to learn a second language. The learners are interviewed on their classroom behaviour as part of the research investigation.

It is found that most of the studies on learners' experiences in learning a second/foreign language have however elicited learners' perceptions of their learning experiences using methods associated with the positivist traditions using questionnaires and structured interviews. While it is acknowledged that these data collection methods are used because they are deemed appropriate based on the nature of the particular research study, in some cases, they have not been able to satisfactorily reveal learners' perspective or provide insights into how the learners learn the language. One of the reasons is because these methods seem to restrict learners' responses and opinions, thus, giving them very little room to express their thoughts and feelings.

However, in recent years, an in-depth qualitative approach has been used to understand learners' views of their language learning experiences by giving the learners an opportunity to comment on their experiences more openly (Tse, 2000). This is evident through the work of Bailey and Nunan (1996) who compiled 19 different studies from the perspectives of different participants, including learners, in teaching and learning situations from different parts of the world. In these studies, the participants are given a voice to relate their perceptions of various teaching and learning issues. For example, in Williams and Burden's (1999) study, an interview method is used to elicit the learners' attribution for success and failure in learning French in three British schools. Tse (2000), on the other hand, uses autobiographical accounts to elicit university students' perceptions of their learning experiences in relation to classroom atmosphere and instruction. In both studies, using a questionnaire or a structured interview might have limited the responses obtained from the learners, and the extent to which the learners could relate their experiences and their concerns. In addition, to the researcher's knowledge, there seem to be insufficient research studies looking into English learning experiences of tertiary students in the Thai context, especially where English is used as a medium of instruction.

Methodology

Using an interpretive approach, the researcher attempted to investigate perceptions of English learning experiences of Thai university students majoring in Business English at an international university in Thailand where the medium of instruction is English. The researcher believes that social reality inherently lies within the individuals' consciousness, which is a complex human phenomenon. Rather than confirming or testing hypotheses, the researcher is more concerned with understanding meanings, as this is how the individuals' social realities could be closely approached.

The research questions are:

1. What are the perceptions of Thai EFL tertiary students on
 - 1.1 how they perceive themselves as Thai learners of English?
 - 1.2 the importance and status of learning English in their current and future lives?
2. What are the experiences that the students identify as having an influence on their learning English focusing on aspects of classroom learning environment and socio-cultural factors?

Participants

The sampling strategy used in the study is a non-probability sample, aiming to explore the perceptions of a group of Thai university students, which would enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes of the main objectives of the study.

To gain sufficient and manageable data, the sample size was determined according to the sample size calculation formula by Yamane (1967). When this formula was applied to the sample, the sample size needed was 293 participants from the population size of 1,102. Only third and fourth year students were included because these students had already studied at the university for at least 2 years and would therefore have important, insightful data for this research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two main data collection methods were used. Firstly, a questionnaire survey consisting of 10 open-ended questions was administered. Then, interviewing using focus group discussions was conducted. The interviews meant to capture the students' points of views of their lived reality and their constructions of experience through an interaction in which small groups of participants and the researcher were engaged. Also, the interviews were employed as a way of understanding the learners' social realities from various angles or perspectives and to capture contextual information on the university environment. This could help understand and interpret their world of meaning as well as to explicate the process of meaning construction, and clarify what and how meanings are manifested in learners' language and everyday behaviour (Schwandt, 1998).

These methods could provide the means through which the data collected could be crystallised to capture the complexities of the social realities of the learners' English learning world. A combination of methods helped to provide more valid data, and obtain more insights into the issue under investigation. This way, the researcher can triangulate findings, demonstrate convergence in results, use one method to inform another, discover contradictions, and extend the breadth of inquiry.

The use of triangulation in this study was taken to involve a few investigators (the researcher and the research assistant) and peer researchers' interpretation of the data during the data analysis process to ensure data accuracy and impartiality. Also, at the stage of face and content validity check, the IOC (Index of Item Objective Congruence) was used where 3-5 expert researchers were asked to examine questionnaire items and categories to be used for interviews and interview questions thoroughly.

For the questionnaire survey, the data was collected to reflect the students' English learning experiences at the university from different angles starting from selves, in classrooms, outside of classrooms, to university influences.

Interviews with the students in a form of group discussions were used afterwards. A semi-structured technique was used for the interviews, considering that it would allow the students to express their feelings and thoughts and to be focused at the same time.

The responses from the questionnaire survey and the interviews were content-analyzed using the interpretive analysis methods of topic ordering and constructing categories suggested by Radnor (2002). Looking for connections across topics, major

categories, and subcategories helped gain the whole picture, as the coded data was transformed into meaningful data.

Findings and Discussion

From the questionnaire analysis, more than half of the students reported that their success in English should not be perceived simply in terms of grades. However, some were inclined to depend on formal normative judgement when they reflected on their achievement in English. This could be because the researcher explained to the learners in print that their experiences of learning English as students who were successful in terms of grades would be looked into.

Overall, the students were sceptical about their attainment, and what other people thought they had accomplished in English in terms of formal learning, indicating that examination results had been regarded as an indicator of success.

In terms of the extent to which the students felt that their knowledge, understanding and skills of the English language had been transformed and enhanced during the classroom learning process, most of the students were particularly concerned with the idea that achieving in English should mean that their knowledge, understanding and skills of English were transformed or built upon through their experiences of learning in the language classroom. These were to materialise in what they believed they should be able to do in English both in written and spoken forms. In this case, within the formal learning environment, the students perceived themselves as the ones who were seeking to discover and develop more knowledge of English to become better English language users, taking into account that they had been learning English formally from the first year of university study. The way the students perceived themselves as learners of English seemed to correspond with the social learning view. Within social learning, students are perceived as the ones who are discovering knowledge and developing capabilities from those who have mastered knowledge or capability (Breen, 2001), like teachers in the language classroom.

Most of the students reported that they had continually improved their English skills from classroom learning since having become undergraduate students majoring in Business English. There were, however, some students who believed that they had not achieved fluency nor accuracy in the language based on their images of good English. In other words, these students perceived themselves as not being able to assert themselves

in English through speaking and writing. For example, some students remarked that they could not speak English fluently and that they still had problems with English grammar.

An important finding noted was that all the students emphasised the ability to converse in English more than other skills as their key criteria for having achieved in English. In other words, the students' sense of accomplishment in English was mostly related to the extent to which they felt they could improve on or excel in spoken English. This finding seemed to concur with Tse's (2000) finding that for the learners in her study, conversational ability was the most important criteria that reflected their actual proficiency in English more than traditional measures of academic competence.

As for the extent to which the students believed that they should behave in role as EFL students within the language classroom, most students perceived themselves as having to behave in role as students based on the status they believed accorded to them in the classroom situation (Wright, 1987). These included their submissive behaviour, mostly keeping quiet in the classroom, doing what was required of them such as completing essays and writing assignments given by the teacher, and speaking in English when the teacher asked to or when answering the teacher's questions. Also, they believed in pleasing the teacher, for example, making sure that they completed the work given.

From one perspective, the students' submissive behaviour materialised because this was what they probably learned through their long school experience. From another perspective, such behaviour could evolve because the teachers had laid down the rules or specifically the teachers made sure that the learners knew what the teachers expected from them.

From a third perspective, the students behaved in such a manner because they regarded their teachers as expert practitioners. Therefore, the students themselves might empower the teachers to tell them what to do, and how and what they should learn. Chick (2001) refers to such learners' behaviour as student taciturnity. This relates to the idea of asymmetrical distribution of social power and knowledge between teachers and students that is evidenced in many educational institutions throughout the world. In other words, the idea that teachers are thought to hold more social power and knowledge leads students to be less assertive. Likewise, Allwright (1996) believes that such classroom behaviour is motivated by social considerations whereby students decide to compromise between competing social and pedagogic demands to avoid social embarrassment.

From a fourth perspective, the students' behaviour may also reflect the idea that the students believed that they had no power to influence their learning within formal

education as it had already been decided for them by people who have the power to make decisions about education at policy and school levels. In these respects, the learners actually had to change their self-concepts as to meet certain institutional and educational expectations. As Goffman (1959) puts it, the learners put up a 'front', pretending that they were learning as they were expected to do so, as they believed this was what they should do as learners of English in the language classroom. This could be the case in this particular context as well.

In terms of the importance and status of learning English in their current and future lives, the students saw English as a necessary tool to help them succeed in their university study and for their future careers. Studying in English as a medium of instruction context forced them to acquire English skills and this indeed reflected learning English with instrumental motivation. They also viewed themselves as successful in their endeavour to learn English in the wider context. Through various English language media, they managed to mediate their learning and make sense of English where they subsequently drew upon the knowledge to complete learning tasks for formal learning.

The students reported that they communicated with different people through the Internet, surfed different English websites on the World Wide Web for information, and enjoyed English movies, songs, and various English texts. From one perspective, this confirmed the effectiveness of natural learning in developing one's target language as advocated by second language researchers such as Lightbown and Spada (1999) and Knight (2001). From another perspective, this indicated that the students were already relatively proficient English language users.

From this perspective, the findings in this study seem to resonate with Lin's (2001) findings in the context of Hong Kong where due to the country's economic and social concerns, English learners of all ability levels realised the importance of English for their future success in society.

The students related that English would not only provide them with access to higher education within and outside the country, but also access to employment for their future. With regard to the importance of English for employment, the students believed that English is the language for international communication. This included that fact that English is the dominant language of ICT at present, and that the students seemed to have particular interest in the use of technology for their various educational and social activities.

Apart from providing access to better education and employment, knowing English, according to the students, also carried prestige and status. This seemed to reflect

the society's general attitude towards English as experienced by the students themselves in their everyday interactions in society.

On a more practical level, based on the students' background, some of the students reported that English was needed for their everyday activities and communication with different people from other countries especially from ASEAN.

The experiences that the students identified as having an influence on their learning English focusing on aspects of classroom learning environment and socio-cultural factors will be analyzed in 5 themes from the findings as follows:

The Business English program of study

The findings showed that the students perceived that their knowledge, understanding and skills of the English language had developed mainly because of studying in the Business English program which emphasises both English proficiency and business knowledge. The learners perceived that the program was very strong and useful in comparison to other programs on offer and that they were overall satisfied with it.

The students indicated that through interacting with Business English texts so far, they were challenged cognitively. This showed that through interacting with learning the Business English materials, the students seemed to have experienced a positive cognitive change. Also from learning with lecturers from various background and nationalities, the students said that they could improve their listening and speaking skills in English even without being aware of it. In fact, exposure to accented speech in English can promote familiarity with it, which has also been suggested to increase comprehension in communication (Munro, 1998).

The learning activities

The findings also revealed that most of the activities that the students experienced centred closely on the prescribed Business English curriculum, and on preparing the learners for examinations and future employment.

Some of the students pointed out some difficulties in writing, reasoning their inability to engage with the topics specified where they could explore their own ideas and thoughts as well as experiences. This seems to reflect Brown's (1980:77) assertion that

“...our present system of education, in prescribing curricular goals and dictating what shall be learned, denies persons both freedom and dignity.” Freedom here referred to the fact that the students had to write about what was required of them. It may be possible that the lecturers, on the other hand, were playing safe because of their concern for covering for examinations and, therefore, allowed very little freedom for the students to explore their ideas.

Another issue related to the students’ perceived difficulty in writing was their concern for correctness in the language. Although this may not evolve strongly from the findings, it can be deduced that due to the focus on examinations and on covering the prescribed framework, correctness in the language was emphasised over the message carried by the language (Wells, 2003). The findings, furthermore, illustrated that though the lecturers emphasised accuracy in the language, there was no clear assistance offered how they could improve their grammar.

There were activities reported that provided the students opportunities to assert themselves actively in English and interact with the lecturer as well as their fellow classmates. More importantly, these activities seemed to have given the students a sense of achievement and more meaning for learning English.

The lecturer’s role

The lecturer’s role is to provide learning experiences where the learners can develop their English. From the findings, the lecturers, were found to be effective and professional and generally understanding. However, they appeared to select and present the students with learning experiences confined mostly to preparing them for examinations. From one perspective, it can be implied that the lecturer was subscribing to a mainstream SLA view of language learning, a view that language learning is individualistic and mentalistic. However, the students were also provided with some opportunities to engage in more open-ended oral activities, providing the students with more social experiences where they could practise English orally and develop their confidence in using English.

The lecturer’s role is to ensure that students can assert themselves in English, and act as a co-participant in the learning situation. Fundamentally, the teacher constitutes an element of the learning resources (Wenger, 1998). As an expert English practitioner, the lecturer can be positioned as a legitimate member of the English speaking community.

Therefore, for many of the students, their English lecturers were their model English users.

The role of language

Another key finding was the important role of language in the students' learning of English in the classroom which seemed to resonate with the view of social learning in relation to the notion of language as a powerful tool for thinking (Candlin and Mercer, 2001; Mercer, 2000). The issue of using Thai was included because these learners were second language speakers.

As language is perceived to be important for thinking, it is important for students to be able to use language to learn. The findings indicate that the use of some Thai in class during group discussions seemed to have helped the students to learn English or manage their learning of the language. It allows the students to explain problems and issues that they were unable to do in English, for example, due to their lack of vocabulary.

These findings showed that from the students' perspectives using Thai in an English class could help them reach a higher level of understanding of the English language despite criticisms made by some second language researchers that using the students' first language might deprive them of genuine examples of English use (e.g. Cook, 2001). As a matter of fact, several studies have shown that using the students' mother tongue is not detrimental to learning English. On the contrary, by using the mother tongue, the students' English learning and use can actually be enhanced (e.g. Johnson, 2001; Lin, 2001). However, in some cases, it may not be possible for the lecturer who is not Thai or comes from a different ethnic background.

University culture, values and expectations

This basically relates to the issue of how the wider social context of the institution influences students' language learning and use. University culture, values and expectations with reference to English learning appeared to be strongly influenced by school leadership. Basically, this referred to what the school administrators believed the rationale, goals and priorities for English learning should be for their schools. It also depended on whether the school had a strong affiliation with English. At the University under study where English is used as a medium of instruction, English proficiency is regarded as one of the three identities of the University alongside ethics and entrepreneurial spirit. As a result,

the administrators appeared to place great importance in developing the students' general proficiency in English.

The way English was perceived and the importance of learning the language was reflected in the effort the University put in to support the students in their learning of the language. Various programmes were organised to help students of all ability levels to learn as well as to use English. This reflects the notion implied by Hopkins (2001) that the organisational conditions of the university are closely related to classroom practice that directly and indirectly impacts student learning.

The findings showed that apart from their English lecturers, the students perceived their university and faculty administrators' enthusiasms and interests in promoting the use of English. English was perceived as a main language of interaction at the University and in all classrooms. This illustrated that the decision to use English within the University was not solely in the hands of the language learners. Instead, institutional support determined how much the students could use English.

Conclusion

This study indicates that it is essential to consult students and consider their perspectives of learning when making decisions about how to help them to learn English better, particularly at classroom and school levels. While decisions are made at policy level, it is how the students experience their learning at classroom and school levels that seem most significant. There still seems to be a need to further understand students and the nature of learning in order to provide more meaningful learning experiences for them in learning English.

The key findings that seemed to emerge from the students' perceptions of their experiences of learning English have actually raised more questions about the English teaching and learning situation in this particular context in Thailand. In order to reach the goals of English learning in Thailand, the researcher believes that universities and teachers need to rethink the learning experiences they are providing for students in helping them become proficient second language users. They need to consider the kind of challenges the students are facing, given the social environment of their learning context in learning English.

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