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Research paper

Can Thai Students Survive without English Teachers? a Case Study of Primary School Students in Thailand

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Abstract

Particular interests in English language teaching practices have been given much attention recently. This study attempts to examine whether trained English majors can help teach English to students in a primary school where there is short of English teachers. Two English instructors, twenty English majors and ninety-four students participated in the study. Theoretical and practical training sessions were organized for twenty English majors before they start teaching the students. English lesson plans were designed relative to four major content areas found in the standardized national English test include vocabulary, reading, conversation, and public signs were used as a guideline for both training and teaching sessions. Pre and post-tests were administered to primary school students before and after the teaching intervention accordingly. Data collected through participant observations were also used to support data collected from the interviews and tests. Results show that our trained English majors could help improve the students' English language proficiency in spite the unavailability of qualified English teachers at their school. Findings offer some insights on possible alternatives to teaching English to primary school students who face similar problems.

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language; Thai Students; English Majors*

1. Introduction

Thailand has encountered problems of teaching and learning English for decades. Among these problems include having unqualified teachers, students' lack of motivation, being in non-English speaking environments, oversized classes, application of inappropriate teaching methodologies (1). The situation of teaching English in schools is even worse. Most English teachers (65%) in primary schools are non-English majors who cannot communicate in English and only 70% of all English teachers in secondary schools are English graduates (2). As a consequence, the latest Thai students' average scores of English language proficiency listed in the Education First English Proficiency Index (3, 4). In the report, Thailand ranked 62nd out of 70 countries with the average score of 45.35% which is far behind its neigbouring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia ranked 12th and 14th with average scores of 61.08% and 60.30%, respectively.

At a national level, Thai students perform fairly poor in the National English language test since 2009. The Office of National Institute of Educational Testing Service reported that from the period of 2009-2014, Thai primary school students who took annual tests never achieved above 50 percent of the total scores. The lowest average score was in 2010 when they only obtained 21 percent.

At a regional level, students are less fortunate as they have limited exposure to English language environment when compared to those who go to schools in city. This is reflected by results of the average Ordinary National English Language Test (O-NET) scores of local school students revealed by Nakhon Si Thammarat Primary Educational Service Area Office 2 from 2013 to 2015 which were too low. Though there was a gradual rise in each year, it still failed to achieve 50% of the total scores.

Thai students' poor performance in English is not only observed after a test is given to any particular groups but the problem is also known among local educators and teachers. Some researchers have attempted to project this failure to problems that are related to the students and not much on the teachers (5-7). Some others argued that many schools all around Thailand face the problems of lacking qualified English teachers in part due to the inadequate number of English graduates that Thailand produces (1). Ban Chai Klong School is one among them. All the English classes at the school were given to a non-English major teacher. Thus, the students do not learn what they are supposed to. At the same time, the school must report their annual O-NET results to the regional or local educational office. This poses more threats to the school. There must be alternatives to the problems. The school director cannot wait for his luck whether or not he will get at least one qualified English teacher for the students. The school is at risks of not getting any. Thus, a small reform in English language teaching and learning should be conducted at a school level. In addition, there needs to be a research study done in order to find solutions to the current problem. In this study, we propose one alternative to teaching English in a school facing the problem. This alternative is that an English programme from a higher educational institution sends its current English majors to teach English at the school while they also study. This study therefore undertakes collaborations between Southern College of Technology and Ban Chai Klong School.

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2. Research Questions

1 How far could the proposed alternative make changes in terms of English language development of primary school students at Ban Chai Klong School?
2 What are components of the proposed alternative to teaching and learning English for primary school students at Ban Chai Klong School in compensation of shortage of qualified English teachers?

3. Significance of the Study

It is hoped that results of this study can offer a new alternative to teaching English in Ban Chai Klong School and those with similar problems. Though they do not have English teachers, our trained English majors can help teach and cover the missing lessons. Since there are not only one school that faces problems of English language teacher shortage, Ban Chai Klong School can share this experience with those who are in need. This way they can also prepare students for the national test every year without fear of being ranked lowest among schools of the same province. Besides, this study can give insights to school directors and early education policy makers to work collaboratively with colleges and universities to solve problems concerning teaching and learning English language.

4. Limitations of the Study

This study seeks to explain the extent to which a new proposed model of teaching English language to 118 primary school students at Ban Chai Klong School during June 2016-January 2017 only. In addition, the model was observed with the condition that our twenty trained English majors acted as student teachers throughout the project. Results of the study might exhibit better outcomes if the classes were taught by English graduates.

5. Definition of Terms

Primary School is a school in which children receive primary education from the age of about six to eleven.
ONET or Ordinary National Educational Test is "the test given to Grade 6 students which aims to test their knowledge, thinking ability, academic proficiency, and to evaluate the quality of education at the national level" (Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E 2551, A.D. 2008).

6. Research in English Language Teaching

Literature has shown that Thailand is struggling to improve its English language teaching practices through research and applications of different strategies proposed by best practices elsewhere. Nevertheless, results have yielded unsatisfactory partially because most studies focused on university students as their subjects neglecting the importance of early years of English education especially at primary school level. There is evidence of some studies that attempted to solve Thai students' poor English language performance in Thailand. For example, (8) conducted an action research to improve Thai undergraduate students' motivation and confidence in speaking English. Three English teachers took part in the project to assist in its implementation and to observe the outcomes. The study was conducted for two semesters. Along with her teaching programme, (8) also collected data from teachers' journals, observation worksheets, students' worksheets, students' diaries and students' self-rating scales to support her study (8). After the teaching, (8) found students' increased confidence in speaking English.

Another action research in Thailand is the work of (9) who attempted to improve her seventh graders' learning performance. (9) used Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach instead of the traditional one. After the intervention, the students have positive attitudes to learning as well as confidence in speaking the language (9). In a more recent research study, (10) claimed that the CTL approach used in many classrooms was still ineffective and thought that more strategies should be incorporated into CLT classes (10). Thus, (10) suggested that integration of Conversational Analysis (CA) contributes to CLT pedagogy. They further supported that CA helped students to critically examine talk and raise linguistic awareness for more effective communication.
There are many other studies that emphasize development of Thai students at tertiary education (6, 7, 11). English language skills should be promoted for students in their early years so that the learning process can continue when they come to tertiary education. Unfortunately, Thailand does not have enough English teachers who can take this role especially in remote areas. The present study aims to improve English language skills of Thai primary school students who did not have privileges to study with qualified English teachers in their regular classes.

7. Research Methodology

7.1. Action Research

This study employs quantitative and qualitative action research in order to find solutions to English language teaching problems which continue to persist in Thailand for many years. The researchers undertook important steps proposed by (12) in conducting action research namely: identify problems, implement data collection, analyse, plan, act, and reflect. This study followed an action research process as summarised in figure 1 below.

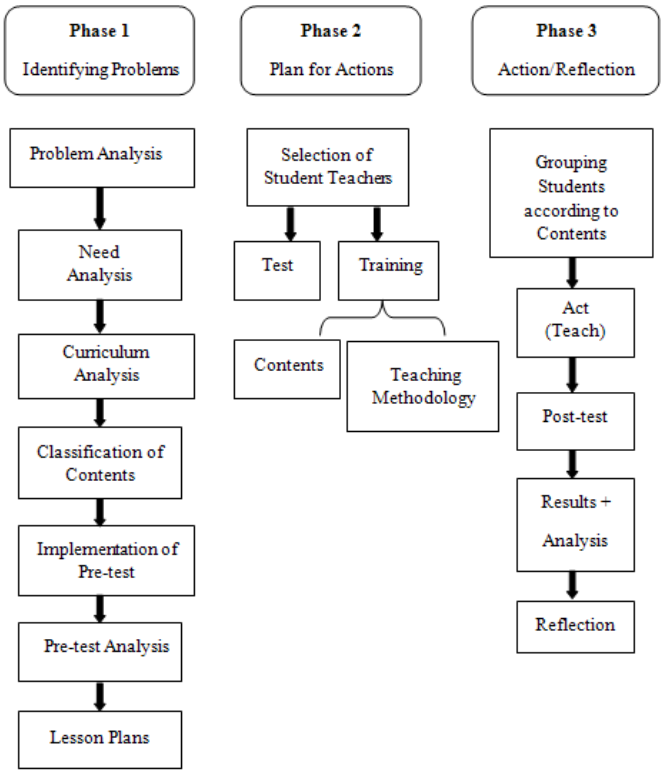

Fig. 1: Summary of the Present Action Research in Three Phases

7.2. Settings

The purpose of this study is to find solutions to a problem of English language teaching especially where there are not enough English teachers or none at all. Consequently, some teachers com-

plained that their students' ONET results dropped every year. There are many schools in the southern region of Thailand which claimed to have encountered the problems. Thus, the researchers selected a primary school in the south of Thailand where there is no single English language teacher during the onset of this study. The selected school for this study was Ban Chai Klong School, located in Thung Song, Nakhon Si Thammarat. Another reason for selecting it was that the school director informed his needs to develop students' English language proficiency. Also, its location is near the college where the student teachers study which is very convenient to travel to and from between the two institutions.

7.3. Population and Sample

This study used students from two local educational institutions located nearby each other. One was Southern College of Technology (SCT) and the other was Ban Chai Klong School (BCKS). Subjects selected from SCT included 20 English majors out of 40 who were enrolling in 1-3 of academic year 2015-2016. They were selected by means of quota sampling. An English test to gauge their English language proficiency was given before the selection in order to obtain the top twenty scorers. They were later referred to as student teachers throughout the study. Two teachers in the English Department at SCT also participated in the study.

This study attempts to solve problems of teaching and learning English in Thai primary schools. Undoubtedly, all schools expect to see good results of their Grade 6 students' ONET performance taken every year. Thus, to meet their needs, Grade 6 students had to participate in our study. However, learning English takes a long process. Therefore, it is good to give an opportunity to Grade 4 -6 students to participate in the study and analyse their progress either within their own group or cross-groups. Therefore, all students totaling of 118 students who enrolled in Grades 4-6 at the school were chosen as subjects of the study as we wanted to see long-term effects after our invention. However, after running the research project for one month, some students did not turn-up for both classes and post-test which caused missing in our data. We therefore decided to remove such cases and included only those that regularly joined our project. The school director and three other teachers also participated in the study.

7.4. Data Collection

To ensure triangulation, below are different instruments that were used to collect data for this study.

7.4.1. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

To identify problems related to English language teaching, students' needs to improve the situations at Ban Chai Klong School as well as their expectations, the researchers conducted interviews with the director and three teachers who have been responsible for Grades 4-6 students' academic development of the school using semi-structured interview questions. The questions elicited responses on what they lacked, and needed, their reflection on teaching and learning English of the students as well as their expectations. Each teacher was interviewed individually which took 10-15 minutes each. The researchers audio-recorded the interviewed and later transcribed for further analysis.

7.4.2. Pre-test Implemented to the Target Students

A pre-test was given to assess the students' English language proficiency and to group them according to their scores. This test contained 40 questions in four English content areas: reading, vocabulary and grammar, conversation, and public signs (ten questions each). It was administered to 94 Grades 4-6 students, one month before actual teaching.

7.4.3. Teaching Plans & Teaching

Teaching was the main and most important activity that was central to the development of the present study. Undoubtedly, effective teaching and learning activities should have been guided by good teaching plans. In this study, teaching plans were constructed based on contents selected from the previous pre-ONET test and on the students' pre-test scores. The plans included English language contents in four areas: reading, vocabulary and grammar, conversation, and public signs. Each topic area is allotted 1 hour and fifteen minutes per period and per student group.

It is important to note that the ONET contents are based on a three year-English language curriculum, i.e. from Grades 4-6. Only Grade 6 students of all primary schools are required by Thai Ministry of Education to sit for the ONET test annually and usually it is given 2 months prior to their completion of the curriculum. This justifies the selection of students from Grades 4, 5 and 6. Given that the researchers have a chance to continue the same project with the same group of students for two more years, they would be able to observe the students' learning progress better.

Due to large number of students, they were divided into four groups. Four rooms were used to teach each language skill (i.e. reading, vocabulary, conversation, or public signs) by the trained student teachers for 6 hours a day or 4 periods. Each student group was assigned to start their class in one room for a period of 1 hour and 15 minutes. Later, they moved to another room after each period to allow them to see other student teachers for other topic areas. Each day the students had to move three times to study all topics for the day. The teaching was designed for 10 days on weekends due to difficulties of scheduling on weekdays on both student teachers and the school students. Two Saturdays of the first and third week of each month were scheduled for teaching beginning from June 2016 to October 2017.

7.4.3. Observation Protocols

Participant observations were used throughout the study. The researchers observed and recorded classroom teaching and learning activities which included information on roles of student teachers, the behaviours of primary students, the students' motivation to learn, their willingness to participate in the project. All the information recorded was used to supplement test scores data.

7.4.5. Post-Test

A post-test was given to 94 students of Grades 4-6 immediately after the 60 hours of teaching. The post-test was the same copy as the pre-test. Then, the pre-test and post-test scores were compared to whether the students improved after the teaching.

8. Data Analysis

Data collected through pre-test and post-test were analysed quantitatively with the use of statistical tool for mean, frequency, and standard deviation. T-test was also performed to identify significant statistical differences between the students' pre and post-test scores after the intervention. Data collected through interviews and documents were analysed qualitatively i.e. by means of content analysis.

9. Results

Data obtained from the interviews with the school director and three teachers indicated that the school lacked English teachers and thus resulted in students' poor performance in English language skills in the last two years. There must have been a pro-

gramme to improve the situation with support from a higher education institution. In this study, Southern College of Technology (SCT) represented a higher education institution as requested by the school.

All the student participants were given a pre-test before they were taught with the prepared lesson plan. This was because the researchers had to use the scores to design the course contents that matched their current level. The pre-test and post-test results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Mean Scores of Pre & Post-tests of Students in Each Class

Class	Mean Scores		Min	Max	Min	Max
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Post-test
Grade 4 (N= 32)	9.87	13.78	0	19	10	20
Grade 5 (N=31)	10.22	14.32	2	16	9	19
Grade 6 (N=31)	10.00	23.90	2	18	10	37
Grades 4-6 (N=94)	10.03	17.30	0	19	10	37

Table 1 presents mean scores of pre-and post-test of 94 students in three classes (grades 4-6). The mean score of grade 4 students was 9.87; grade 5 students' was 10.22; and grade 6 students' was 10.00 relatively. As can be clearly seen from the table, the post-test mean scores of grade 6 students increased the highest (23.90) when compared to the post-test mean scores of the students in grades 4 and 5 (13.78 and 14.32). It is also evident that the minimum pre-test scores of all classes were found extremely low or considered failed. Despite their higher minimum post-test scores than on the pre-test, they still remained below half of the total score (40 points). Nevertheless, most students outperformed on the post-test, particularly grade 6 students whose maximum post-test scores rose to 37 points.

9.1. Students' Improvement

The students have shown their improvement in English language understanding after the teaching intervention as evident in their post-test results shown in Table 1 above. Results of paired sample t-test revealed that a statistical difference was found between the mean scores of pre and post-test of all students as a whole (t=9.9, SD=7.1, p<.05; see Table 2).

Table 2: T-test on Pre & Post-test Scores of Grades 4-6 Students (N=94)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Grades 4-6	PRE –POST	-7.2660	7.11076	.73342	-8.7224	-5.8095	-9.907	93	.000

Table 3: T-test on Pre & Post-test Scores of Grade 6 Students (N=31)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Grade 6	PRE - POST	-13.9032	7.62170	1.36890	-16.6989	-11.1076	-10.157	30	.000

When considering the students' performance of each class separately, significant differences were also found between pre and post-test scores of Grades 4, 5, and 6 students at .05 level of statistical significance (t=5.16, SD=4.27; t=6.63, SD=3.43; t=10.15, SD=7.62; respectively). It is important to note that the sixth graders dramatically improved in their performance than any other classes, maybe because they worked hardest (see Table 3).

9.2. Components of the New Teaching Alternative

One other main objective of this study is to explain how our new alternative of training English majors to teach primary school students who had less exposure to better English learning and teaching environment. Results of post-test scores indicated that the students satisfactorily improved their English language skills after studying with our trained English majors. It is worthy of note that there are a number factors that influenced the effective of this study. First, The school must collaborate with a higher education to set and move towards goals throughout the study. There are times when instructors from both parties need to talk and discuss as problems arise. Second, the selected English majors should be trained for both relevant academic contents as well as appropriate teaching methodology. Third, appropriate and authentic English materials should be designed and used during teaching activities. Finally, the total number of hours alloted for teaching should not be less than 60.

10. Discussion and Implications

This study confirms that after training, our English majors could help develop primary school students' English language skills. Two observations can be drawn from the present results. First, like many other previous studies (5-7, 10) done to promote students' English language proficiency in Thailand, the researchers come up with positive outcomes. This means that there are things that we can do to improve the situation. The next question to consider is by whom and how. Thailand needs more experts in English language skills to design appropraite activities for each school according to its own particular context. Second, results of this study at least offers one solution to problems of English teachers' shortage as claimed by many Thai researchers such as (1, 6, 7, 13). School directors do not need to wait for more years to receive qualified English teachers instead seeking for assistance from English experts of higher education. Educators and policy makers should provide platforms for qualified English majors to contribute to local community through sharing of knowledge and helping young children to learn.

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