

A study of the Problems Faced by Thai Students in Acquiring English with Specific Reference to the First Year Students at the Northern Campuses of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

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Introduction

There are innumerable hurdles that the learner of English as a foreign language, has to cross in order to learn the use of English with ease. Lack of exposure, particularly because of minimum contact with English both in the classroom as well as outside, is one of the major problems in learning English. Thai students face certain specific problems like the strong influence of the mother tongue, lack of opportunities for practising English, inadequate proficiency of the teachers in English and lack of motivation. The curriculum also needs to be made more learner-friendly. In fact, the Thai education system is well-planned and adequately supported by the Government. Language laboratories and other technological aids are available on a large scale.

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University is one of the oldest and the largest Buddhist University in Thailand. It has 3 campuses and 2 Sangha colleges in the Northern region of Thailand. According to its curriculum,

revised in 1995, all first year students from every major must enroll in the basic English course. Introduction of this provision necessitates effective learning and teaching of the students with a variety of background knowledge and skills in the English language. The researcher being an employee of one of these campuses has the first hand experience of teaching English to the first year students face to face.

The aim of this study is to explore and analyze the problems and needs of the first year students in learning English, to compare the problems and needs of the English majors and non-English major students and the relevant relationships between teaching methods, current curriculum and students' needs. The published tables were administrated with 345 questionnaires and skills test, in the second semester of the academic year 2007, to the first year students of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in three of Thailand's Northern campuses and two Sangha Colleges (Nakornsawan Sangha College is excluded), including Chiang Mai campus, Phayao campus, Phrae campus, Pitsanulok Sangha College and Lamphun Sangha College, with a response rate of 97.10%.

The result of the study showed the significant variables which affect the problems of learning English ($p < 0.001$). It showed that students' problems, teachers' problems, and other problems could account for 98.30% of the problems of learning English ($p < 0.01$). In addition, there were significant differences between the problems of learning English between the English major and non-English majors students. Furthermore, it was revealed that the teaching methods were not in accordance with the students' needs of learning English ($p < 0.01$), and the current curriculum was not suitable for

learning English significantly ($p < 0.05$). On the contrary, there were no significant differences between the needs of learning English of the students who are English major and majors in other subjects.

The implication of this study is that it provides detailed information for individual students, institutes and policy planners to develop plans, and consultation guidelines for individual and classes of individuals regarding the problems and the needs of learning English at the first year level at the Northern campuses of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. The variables which affect the problems and the needs of learning English could be applied in Northern campuses concerned by way of facilitating their aim of learning English by the first year students and becoming a successful teaching and learning organization. Besides, the variables which affect the problems and the needs of learning English by the first year students who are English major and in other majors, should bring the results with regard to the appropriate quality of learning and teaching English, that will also increase the productivity of the University.

The results of this study may motivate the executive directors of the Northern campuses of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University to modify the programmes of study. In addition, the strategies and policies on how to increase the quality and decrease limitation in learning English could have a positive impact on everyone.

The current research not only indicates the importance of problems and the needs of learning English of the first year students at the northern campuses of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, the finding from this research could be also applied to the other campuses.

Methodology and Technique

A. Population

The population consists of 345 first year students who have completed the first semester in three campuses and two Sangha colleges of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (75 students are English major, 270 students are other majors).

B. Questionnaire

A comprehensive questionnaire was designed in Thai. It included sets of questions along the following lines: There is a section of questions related to general information about the learners like age, academic background, family background and the subjects studied. Second section deals with their exposure to English and the impact of mother tongue. The third section of the questionnaire deals with the problems related to the basic skills like reading and writing. The last section is mainly diagnostic and analytical, which tries to find out the major problems and to arrive at certain solutions.

C. Skills Test

The test in English and measures the ability of students in areas such as parts of speech, definite/indefinite article, tenses, preposition and conjunction. Both questionnaire and skills test were given to a sample of first years students at Mahamakutraajavidyalaya Buddhist University, Lanna campus, to ensure that the questionnaire is accurately understood.

The Respondents' Background Information

The finding revealed that most of the respondents graduated Prariyattidhamma (the school where mundane and Dhamma subjects are

taught) (28.60%), followed closely by Mattayom 6 (Grade 12) (27.70 %), and non-formal education (27.00 %). Nobody in the family of the respondents has competency of English speaking (77.80%). The majority of respondents had never studied English with a native English teacher (46.60%), followed by studying English with the first native English teacher in first year of the university (23.80%). The majority of respondents disagree liking English at present (30.90%) and agree (29.90%).

Other's problems

Results from descriptive statistics also indicated that the students' problem were having time to study English outside the class (strongly agree = 25.40 %, agree = 29.90 %) , make their own opportunities to practice using English (strongly agree = 24.10 %, agree = 30.50%), to read and understand a long sentence (strongly agree = 35.70 %, agree = 25.40%), to write a long sentence (strongly agree = 41.50%, agree = 23.80%), to write an essay or a letter in English (strongly agree = 46.90%, agree = 21.50%), to listen to the English speaking person (strongly agree = 39.90 %, agree = 24.80%), to speak to the English speaking person (strongly agree = 46.90 %, agree = 21.20%), to understand English grammar and its structure (strongly agree = 28.90 %, agree = 26.70%), to understand English tenses (strongly agree = 31.80 %, agree = 26.00%).

The teachers' teaching techniques

The majority of respondents in three campuses and two Sangha Colleges had a little to fairly much problem about the teachers' teaching techniques.

The current curriculum

The majority of respondents in five campuses neither agree nor disagree about the current curriculum problem.

Students' need about curriculum

The educators of the university should provide applied English course, conversation course, English class at least 3 periods per week, English camp, and international English programme for further education. Furthermore, they should add English practicing and activities, for instance, club and activity, conversation practicing, 4 skills teaching (speaking listening reading writing, respectively).

Students' need about teacher

The educators of the university should provide teachers who are Thai or native speaking teacher (If it is possible, there should be sometimes a native speaking teacher in order to motivate the students to learn English). Whereas, these English teachers should be more experienced, good teaching technique, good characteristics, and more practicing. Besides, they should provide the teaching method which is in accordance with the students' needs, for instance, teaching English and translate into Thai, more homework for more practice, vocabulary testing, everyday English learning, outdoor training, and chat corner.

In the materials of English learning, the teachers or educators should support tape, video, CD, computer, text, picture, learning English through the songs, movies etc. to help the students improve their knowledge and attitude about English.

The assessment

According to this study, the last students' need is about the assessment of learning English which instructor should perform; pre-post test in the class, individual test, oral test, monthly test, marks collected with activities.

Conclusion

From the backgrounds of the students, we are able to understand about the first year Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University students in Northern campuses and Sangha colleges that nobody in their family has competency of English speaking (77.80%), they had never studied English with a native English teacher (46.60%), and they disagree liking English in school (39.90%) and at present (30.90%). So both instructors and learners should cooperate to shift paradigm from “I like English a little” to “I value English as an international language”



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