

Problems in Learning the Foundation English Course of Students at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the students' problems in learning the foundation English course in relation to the four areas: instructors, learners, curriculum and textbook, and administration. The sample groups of students were selected from four faculties. Interviews and a questionnaire were used for collecting data. The results showed that, most students had the problems ranging from low to moderate levels. In comparison, the problems of the students among the four faculties were not significantly different. Fortunately, some solutions to the problems were possible, e.g. using team teaching, using simplified English, considering the learners' needs, and reducing class size.

Keywords : Administration Problems, Curriculum Problems, Foundation English, Instructor Problems, Learner Problems, Textbook Problems.

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Introduction

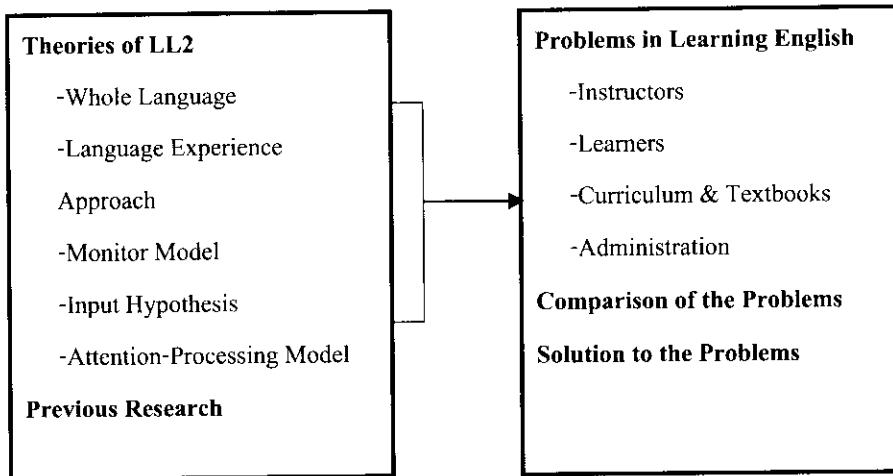
The use of English is not a common practice among Thais. Nevertheless, the importance of English cannot be ignored. English is a window to the world, a means for global communication (Manivannan, 2008). In Thailand, many people begin to understand the present situation and like to send their children to English medium schools. That is why educational institutions throughout the country try to increase the amount of English teaching in classrooms. In spite of the growing interest in teaching English, Thai public is very vocal in showing its dissatisfaction with the state education system. Students, parents, and industry have repeatedly questioned why, after years of English education, university students' communicative English level has been lower than expected and in many cases non-functional (Mackenzie, 2002). Pollard (2005) accepted that there were some problems regarding the teaching of English as a foreign language in the country. Nakhonsawan Rajabhat University is no exception. All students at the university, regardless of their specialisations, are required to take the foundation English course. This situation leads to high frustration, confusion and stress amongst the students; they suffer from academic difficulties, for example, participating in classroom activities. Accordingly, it is important to investigate rigorously what exactly are the real problems of the students and what can be done to possibly solve those problems.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are (a) To study the problems in learning the foundation English course of students at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University in relation to instructors, learners, curriculum and course books, and administration, (b) To compare the problems of the students among faculties, and (c) To find solution to the problems.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the theories underlying second language learning (LL2) and previous research related to problems in learning English, the researcher has created a conceptual framework as presented in the following diagram:



Research Methodology

This is a basic research of which the population comprised 10 instructors and 434 undergraduate students from four faculties at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University. The sample group of 244 students was selected from the population by way of cluster random sampling. Two types of instruments were used for data collection – a questionnaire and interviews. The data on the students' problems were collected by administering the questionnaire to the sample group. Besides, an interview was organised with a small group of students, and another interview with the group of the instructors who taught the foundation English course. Then the data from the questionnaire were analysed to find out the arithmetic means (\bar{X}) and the standard deviation (S.D.). Further analyses were made to compare the means by using One-way Analysis of Variance. Lastly, the data obtained from the interviews were analysed by way of qualitative data analysis.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion were concerned with (a) the students' problems in learning the foundation English course in the four areas – instructors, learners, curriculum and course books, and administration; (b) the comparison of the problems among the four faculties; and (c) the solutions to the problems.

Firstly, in terms of instructor problems, the students from Humanities and Social Sciences and those from Science and Technology had the problems at a low level, whereas the students from Education and Management Science faculties had the problems at a moderate level. The instructor problems considered most important were the following: lack of punctuality, lack of teaching preparation, and failure to take care of individual students. These problems were due to a large number of factors. For example, each instructor taught too many hours a week, and there was not enough time to prepare his or her lessons. In many classes, there were so many students that the instructor could not possibly look after them individually. Solving these problems was possible if more English instructors were recruited, or if the class size was reduced. However, increasing the number of teachers was not an easy task because English major graduates were in high demand in schools and universities but there were not enough qualified teachers (Kosashunhann, 2007). Besides, teachers' salaries were low, which made teaching an unattractive career. Rather than becoming teachers, the most competent language graduates became flight attendants, clerks, receptionists or find other positions in private sectors. This problem was not limited to language graduates, but was endemic within the Thai education system (Mackenzie, 2002).

In terms of learner problems, the students from Science and Technology had low level problems; while those from the other faculties, moderate level. The learner problems considered most important were the following: "I do not like to learn English, I do not understand spoken English, I cannot speak English, and I do not have good basic knowledge of English". These problems were closely related to learning strategy which should be established in the language learners. The learners themselves should increase their motivation and participation in the use of the target language. Kosashunhann (2007) gave the following advice: "Ask teachers to explain and try to be confident; Stop worrying about mistakes; and Practice English outside the classroom with songs, news, movies, or books in English". As a rule, Thais do not speak English particularly well, especially when compared with some other South-East Asian countries like Malaysia or Singapore. There are many reasons for this such as L1 interference and questionable education system (*Teaching English in Bangkok*, 2008).

In terms of curriculum and textbook problems, the students from Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, and Management Science had moderate level problems; while the students

from Science and Technology, low level. The curriculum and textbook problems considered most important were the following: The textbooks were poorly designed, The textbooks lacked interesting pictures, and Students were not given opportunities to choose textbooks of their own interest. These problems conform to the fact given by Qiang & Wolff (2003) that textbooks written by Thai teachers often used inappropriate vernacular. They were usually authored by teachers who had little or no exposure to English culture and must rely upon their understanding of dictionary definitions for word choice. In this situation, the textbook need to be evaluated. Following are some questions to ask (Grant, 1988: 120):

- “- Is the book communicative?*
- Does it fit in with our objectives?*
- Does it seem teachable?*
- Will the students be able to use the language to communicate as a result of using the book?”*

In terms of administration problems, the students from Science and Technology had low level problems, whereas the remaining students, moderate level. The administration problems considered most important were the following: “Classrooms are noisy, There are too many students in each classroom, and There are very few English teachers”. These problems can overlap with instructor and learner problems because these areas are actually interrelated. Inevitably, administrators are responsible for making plans that will facilitate learning. In essence, The number of students should not be too large for the teacher to manage effectively.

Secondly, when the comparison of the problems was made, the result showed that the problems of the students from the four faculties were not significantly different.

Thirdly, some solutions to the problems are possible. It is possible to solve the instructor problems by using team teaching – a Thai teacher working together with a foreign teacher. Team teaching has a lot of advantages. Using authentic materials is also a good solution to the teacher problem. One example of materials is English newspaper, which can be adapted to suit the language learning activities such as skimming, scanning, and understanding vocabulary. Using the Internet is another solution as it is more challenging to students. It is effective in bringing the

outside world into the classroom. Besides, the teaching and learning can be a lot of fun.

To solve the learner problems, using easy English is less threatening. It makes the lesson more enjoyable and promotes positive attitudes towards learning English. When the learner faces unfamiliar words, it is wise to use synonyms, words with the same or similar meaning. Another possible solution is using explanation which is sometimes provided in the text by the writer.

In order to solve the curriculum and textbook problems, the process of curriculum development is important. The curriculum should reflect learning theories as well as the needs of the learners. Also, it is also a good idea to have students design their own curricula. Research has shown that these students are more active than traditional students.

To solve administration problems, reducing class size is necessary. A smaller class will allow the teacher to take good care of individual students since the teacher spends less time on paper work. Administration problems can also be solved effectively if staff hold a meeting each week so that they can find ways of working together to achieve common goals. Conducting prediction study is advisable for administrators to solve administration problems. This study will provide information about students and all stake-holders which is useful for long-term plan. Using technology in solving administration problems is a common practice nowadays. A good example is the use of teleconference or electronic mail. Also, classroom arrangement or classroom design should allow learning to take place in friendly atmosphere. For example, a round table or a U-shaped table is suitable for class discussion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the students had some degrees of problems in learning the foundation English course, in relation to the four areas, and their problems were not significantly different from each other. Fortunately, solutions to such problems have been considered extensively.

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