

Education Innovation in Elementary English Classes: Local in Content, Global in Outlook

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Abstract. English education development has recently received substantial attention from diverse educational contexts, aiming to nurture global competitiveness of their citizens. It is also recognized that cultural awareness is an essential part of both teaching and learning a language. Therefore, exposure to cultural diversity is seen to contribute to the enhancement of cultural competence, one of the major components of successful language learning. However, before going global and developing intercultural competence, there is a need to maximize the potential that the local culture prevails in the English lessons. The goal of this study is to foster local culture appreciation and to promote English development among young Thai learners of English. The study is based on the premise that the familiarity with the local culture should facilitate language skill development in general, and with a particular focus on speaking. A set of education innovation tasks was designed and developed based on culturally familiar content, including pre-test, English lessons, and a simulation tour guide task. The data elicited reveal that the tasks which were woven around culturally familiar content offer gains in not only cultural knowledge but also linguistic competence, making language learning personally meaningful and relevant for these young learners.

Keywords: education innovation, elementary classes, local culture, global English

1. Introduction

Recently, English language teaching has received substantial attention from diverse educational contexts, with the ultimate goal to nurture global competitiveness of their respective citizens. This phenomenon has been triggered by a number of scenarios, but the two principal ones are as follows. First, in a global context, it is generally accepted that English has become an international language, compelling educators to mobilize their efforts to promote English language learning and teaching. Second, especially in the ASEAN context, English has attained the status of being the working language in the region. Consequently, for citizens to fully and effectively participate in global and local activities, English language development is essential across all levels of education, business, and communication.

As far as English language education is concerned, it is recognized that language and culture are inseparable [1], [2]. As a matter of fact, culture plays a principal role in determining and influencing the outcome of language learning. Therefore, exposure to cultural diversity is seen to contribute to the enhancement of inter-cultural competence, one of the prominent and pivotal components of successful language learning [3], [4]. Although developing intercultural competence is essential and should be developed [5], this paper contends that there is an urgent necessity to maximize the potential that local culture prevails in English lessons.

Despite the implementation of a number of English curricula and the delivery of English lessons to the full paradigm across educational levels for an extended period of time, English language education in Thailand has unfortunately been met with limited success [6] – [12]. In order to ameliorate this adverse situation, a multitude of factors have been stipulated to contribute to this undesired limitation, including

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unqualified English teachers, insufficient audio and visual or IT (Information Technology) supports, inherent Thai learners' characteristics of being shy and reticent potentially impeding language learning, and inadequate or inappropriate books and teaching materials [6], [9].

At this juncture, teaching materials as one of the crucial factors determining English language education success deserve our scrutiny and focus. To elaborate, across multiple levels of education, commercial textbooks adopted in Thai classroom settings were written and purchased to serve English classrooms worldwide. To be precise, these materials were not catering to specific English classroom settings. As a result, certain elements and foci exhibited in the materials might not be culturally relevant to learners in individual educational contexts. For instance, one unit of a book might be devoted to the celebration of Christmas or a description of a city like New York, which might be commonly known or familiar to certain groups of students especially those in urban areas. However, this same concept of Christmas celebration or the city of New York might not be easily digested and appreciated by learners especially those in rural areas. Consequently, it can be claimed that the prevailing limited success of English language teaching in Thailand has been exacerbated by the use of these commercial language materials, possibly further hindering English language learning outcomes.

This article represents an attempt to take a step forward in improving language teaching, facilitating the task of learning English. Based on the assumption that topics presented in a textbook or teaching materials that are relevant or can be connected to learners' familiarity are likely to allow learners to focus on the language, instead of struggling with the content that is unfamiliar or something they have never heard of. Specifically, this study highlights an example of education innovation on the premise that the appreciation for local culture should be prioritized, fostered, and exalted for the potential benefit of facilitating the challenge of English language learning [13]. The implementation of education innovation as well as a series of lessons and activities generated from this education innovation was empirically attested. Evidence collected from this study leads to the conclusion that by integrating local culture into English language education, teachers could create a favorable environment for language learners. Meanwhile, learners' capacity to participate in language activities can be developed, contributing to the increased success of language education. Additionally, the integration of local culture contributes to the enhanced authenticity in English language classrooms.

2. Methods

This section initially presents the goal and objectives addressed by this study. Subsequently, an elementary school that is situated adjacent to a historical site was selected. Next, a set of procedures regarding instruction and language task design for this study was described. Then, data were collected and analyzed. The following sections describe the details of the methodological procedures.

2.1. Goal and objectives

The overall goal of this study is to develop and assess education innovation that fosters local culture appreciation and awareness among young Thai learners of English. Specific objectives of this study are threefold: 1) to enhance students' awareness of their local community; 2) to demonstrate that, with education innovation that integrates local culture identity with English lessons, these students were able to utilize their combined knowledge to successfully execute a language task; and 3) to show that the students had positive and favorable attitudes towards the English education innovation and language lessons and activities.

2.2. Procedures for the entire period (five weeks)

To accomplish these three objectives, a series of tasks was designed and developed based on culturally familiar content. The procedures include school and grade level selection, pre-posttest creation, education innovation development, lessons delivery, simulation tour guide task implementation, and eventually a mini-questionnaire administration.

2.2.1. School selection

This study is based on the premise that, to improve English, students' familiarity with the local culture is likely to facilitate language skill development in general, and speaking in particular. Therefore, a research

site was carefully selected. In this study, a small-sized school in a province west of Bangkok next to a historical site provides an ideal research site for this study. This school is located adjacent to a Buddhist temple of about 300 years old. Given the school location, from a cultural perspective, it is crucial that school students be aware of their identity in connection to the local community. Most of the students' parents are workers, employed by the factories surrounding the school. Even though most of the students are Thai, a number of them are descendants of Burmese immigrants. Generally, these students are deprived of additional educational facilities that would allow them to practice English outside class.

Given the wide range of Grades from 1 to 6, a class of Grade Level 4 was selected to represent the participants of this study for a number of reasons. First, these Grade 4 students of about 10 to 11 years old have had English education since they were in Grade 1. Therefore, at the time of study, they must have had a certain level of English knowledge that could be built on in this study. Second, a cohort of Grade 4 students is relatively free from the pressure to sit for the national exam imposed on Grade 6 students. However, given the young age of Grade 4 students, language activities and lessons generated must be prepared with great care to make sure the difficulty level and the length of the lesson are appropriate for the students' level. The Grade 4 class initially consisted of 38 students. However, not all students attended class or completed all of the activities of this research that covered the entire period of five weeks. Each of the following procedures described below took place at different periods of the project.

2.2.2. Pretest created and administered (week 1)

Based on the pamphlet prepared by the Provincial Office containing historical accounts in Thai of the temple or local culture, the local knowledge was transformed into pedagogical orientation including language lessons and tasks. First, a pretest (and also posttest) in Thai was created. The function of this pre-posttest is to assess the students' knowledge of the temple, with which they were familiar by sight because it is adjacent to their school. The pretest consists of ten items requiring the students to fill the blanks. Some questions on the test include *How old is the temple?* and *What is the name of the temple?* The total score for the pretest is 10 points. The pretest was administered to the students in the first class meeting. It took the students approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Upon completion, the pamphlet containing the historical accounts of the temple written in Thai was distributed. At this juncture, the researcher went over the test items, sharing with them the answers of the test items. The test was marked, and the test scores were recorded. Spelling was not penalized as long as the answers made sense.

At the very end of this session in week 1, the students were told about the activities that would take place in the following four weeks. The highlight of the five week instruction is the final week or week 5 when the students would be asked to individually perform a simulation tour guide task in English at the temple chapel. The announcement of this particular activity at the conclusion of the instruction put the students in a state of shock. They considered the task daunting and did not believe they would be able to execute the task. They also considered the task too demanding and challenging.

2.2.3. Education innovation developed and implemented (weeks 2, 3, and 4)

Theoretically, effective learning is assumed to take place through the opportunity to work on authentic materials [14]. Similarly and along the same line of the principle, based strictly on the historical accounts of the temple provided by the Provincial Office, three lessons of English education innovation were developed by the researcher. Each of the three individual English lessons is about one A4 page in length, focusing on the topics of location, history, and important objects of the temple, respectively. Every lesson follows the same format of presentation. That is, each lesson begins with a list of ten words related to the topic of the lesson. Vocabulary is an important language component that links diverse language skills of speaking and reading, allowing communication to flow smoothly. These words are presented concurrently with their Thai equivalent translations. Subsequent to the vocabulary section is the reading section that consists of only four to six itemized sentences to accommodate the students' young age. All proper names of important figures in the history in English are concurrently presented in Thai in parentheses to avoid possible confusion. The three lessons were delivered by the researcher in weeks 2, 3 and 4. Each lesson lasted for a total of 100 minutes or two class periods (50 minutes each), with a 10 minute break. PowerPoint slides corresponding to the lesson content were prepared and presented to the students on the projector. The contents of the slides,

when appropriate, were accompanied by vivid images of the items related to the lessons. In each class, the researcher first introduced to the class individual words. With the provision of Thai translation, the focus was placed upon the pronunciation of each word. This stage was deemed very important because it provided a basis for subsequent activities. A number of activities on this vocabulary part include repetition of the target words individually/collectively or elicitation the target words using the prompts in Thai.

After the instruction of vocabulary was completed, the researcher moved to the next activity of reading. The reading part was related to the topic of the lesson; the sentences were constructed based on the ten words previously taught. Due to the young age of the students, only four to six sentences were constructed to ensure that the task was not too daunting for them. The sentences were presented individually several times to the class, providing a transition from their knowledge about local culture in Thai to English. Because the students presumably were familiar with the content presented in Thai in week 1, they should be able to concentrate on the English language used to describe the knowledge of the local culture.

Towards the end of the lesson, to check whether the students mastered the words, the researcher assigned them to study the word list during the weekend and prepare for the dictation task that would be administered in the following week. At this juncture, it should be noted that the integration of the dictation task served as a means to keep track of the students' progress as far as vocabulary learning is concerned and to provide motivation for them to study the word list. In the dictation task that took place in the following week, the researcher prepared a worksheet for them to write the words produced by the researcher. Each word was pronounced twice or more, if requested. The words written were marked as correct or incorrect. The scores were recorded, but not analyzed because the task was used as a means to reward those who obtained high test scores in the form of candy or snacks. To make sure that no one was left behind or felt discouraged in this activity, as is often the case, the students who obtained a higher score than their previous dictation would earn a prize as well. All in all, the same set of teaching and learning activities as described above (vocabulary and reading, followed by dictation) was conducted in weeks 2, 3, and 4.

2.2.4. A simulation tour-guide task executed (week 5)

In week 5, the final week of the research project, the class meeting initially took place in the classroom as in the previous four weeks. Each student received a copy of the posttest (identical to the pretest) to complete. After the posttest, a simulation tour-guide task was conducted. Theoretically, effective learning is assumed to take place through the opportunity to work on authentic materials and authentic tasks [14] – [17]. This tour guide simulation gives the students the opportunity to manipulate their knowledge of local culture and of English and put it into a practical and authentic use of speaking. To comply with this principle, the simulation tour guide task required these young learners to employ their body of knowledge about both local culture and English. To begin with, the students as well as the researcher proceeded to the temple together which was about five minutes away. This activity took place in the temple compound at the chapel which houses a sacred Buddha image. Given the fact that they had been aware of this activity from the very beginning, the activity was not too surprising to them. However, they were quite excited. Once at the temple compound, they were told that they were allowed to have the handouts with them for preparation. They could prepare as long as they wanted to. Once they thought they were ready, they could enter the chapel to see the researcher waiting there. They were supposed to act like a tour-guide, providing English description of the temple in about 10 sentences. Some students were ready to execute the simulation task right away, whereas others took longer. Eventually, all students successfully executed the task.

2.2.5. A mini-questionnaire administered (week 5)

Every student who completed the simulation task was requested to complete a mini-questionnaire consisting of one open-ended question asking about their attitudes towards the activities and lessons from week 1 to week 5 of the five week instruction.

2.3. Data analysis

The data of this study are from multiple sources. First, the pretest and posttest scores were statistically analyzed and compared to assess whether the students had increased their local culture knowledge. Second, the global assessment of the simulation task performance was conducted solely by the researcher. Finally, the

answers to the open ended question regarding their attitudes towards the lessons and activities were qualitatively analyzed.

3. Results and Discussion

Out of the original pool of 38 students, the final pool consists of 30 students, including only those who attended the lessons in week one and in week 5. This is because in these weeks, the following activities including the pretest, the posttest, the tour guide simulation task, and the questionnaire were administered. Descriptive statistics conducted on the pretest scores (min = 0, max = 7, mean = 3.03) and the posttest scores (min = 5, max = 10, mean = 7.97) indicated that the students at the beginning of the instruction did not seem to know much about the temple. However, after weeks of instruction, their test performance improved, suggesting a gain in their knowledge of the local culture. To verify whether the knowledge gained was substantial, the comparison of the students' pretest and posttest mean scores was analyzed by t-test. The result showed that the gain in local culture knowledge was significant at $p < 0.01$ ($t = 17.22$, $p = 0.000$), implicating the substantial benefit from the implementation of the education innovation and teaching activities and lessons.

In order to ensure that the students could demonstrate their knowledge of the local culture in English, a meaningful and authentic tour guide simulation task was implemented right inside the chapel. At this juncture, it should be noted that this task was to provide the students an opportunity to manipulate their integrated knowledge of culture and English. Therefore, the researcher's assessment of their performance in this task was global, either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. That is, the mistakes made with regard to grammar or pronunciation were ignored as long as they could express themselves in English. At the chapel, some students, after reviewing the handouts for a short while, could execute the task, others took longer. Although there were some moments of hesitation, eventually, every one of the students managed to successfully execute the task. Their satisfactory performance in this task clearly indicates that, based on their knowledge about the target site in Thai and with some help with English, they could accomplish the task.

Finally, based on the mini-questionnaires collected, all of the students expressed their positive feelings and attitudes toward the lessons and activities that took place during the five week period. Some students requested that the researcher come and teach them again in the future.

Based on the data above, a number of remarks can be made. First, a salient and crucial factor is the temple, which is a representation of the culture and identity of the local community. The knowledge of local culture in Thai can contribute to the learning of English and be put into practical use. As shown, the lessons and activities enhanced communicative competence and students' motivation to use English in an authentic and meaningful context. All in all, this study demonstrates the challenge of incorporating the identity of the local community and culture into English education.

4. Conclusion

This paper highlights the role of local culture generating education innovation. As shown, this paper presents education innovation for elementary English classes which was constructed and empirically validated to be valuable and practical. The data for this study were gathered mainly through the implementation of a series of activities generated from education innovation including a pretest and posttest, followed by a simulation task, and a mini-questionnaire. The study demonstrates that the language tasks which were woven around culturally familiar content offer gains in both cultural knowledge and linguistic competence, making language learning personally meaningful, intellectually stimulating, and naturally relevant to young learners' context. Potentially, this leads to the boost of English language outcome significantly, as well as the fostering of community identity. Finally, educational innovation created has shown the ability to empower students and teachers to consolidate efforts to be the agents of change in the realm of English language learning.

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