

Students' Perceptions towards Learning English at Narathiwat Technical College

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ABSTRACT : *The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions towards learning English at Narathiwat Technical College. The participants of this study were 10 second year vocational students majoring in electrical power from Narathiwat Technical College, Narathiwat province, south of Thailand. The instruments used in this study was a semi-structure interview. The findings of the study indicated that the students did not like an English subject because it is difficult for them and they perceived English was not important as they have not used the language in their daily life. Moreover, the topics used by the teacher were not of their interest. As a result, the English subject can be very dull for them. This study is very vital for Teacher Training Division, English supervisors and English teachers because serious planning and implementations were required to improve the vocational students' English ability in this province.*

KEYWORDS: *Perceptions, Vocational students, Narathiwat Technical College, Semi-structure Interview.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the time of globalization, the most important language being used to communicate among countries is English (Punthumasen, 2007). English becomes increasingly important for Thailand since Thailand has become a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2015. Every government member of ASEAN has adopted English as a lingua franca (Kirkpatrick, 2012) and has increased efforts to improve English language teaching (ELT) in order to prepare their citizens for the future union of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Therefore, the demand for good ELT approaches is crucial. However, English language teaching has been deemed by many to be rather ineffective. This has in fact become the hotly debated issue on the Internet.

In Thailand, English remains as a foreign language (Noytim, 2008). English has been taught as a foreign language (EFL) because Thai people do not use English as an official language. This means Thai students use English only in the classroom, while they do not have a chance to practice English outside the class. Besides, Thai English teachers prefer to use the traditional teaching method and use the Thai language as the medium of instruction. The use of the traditional methods of teaching together with Thai language to convey the lesson has made English classes tedious and de-motivated the students (Kongkerd, 2013; Hayikaleng, Nair & Krishnasamy, 2016). Although Thai government has made great efforts to improve English skills in vocational and technical education, it still remains as a serious problem because of a lack of interest and poor basic principles of English among Thai vocational and technical students (Choosri & Intharaksa, 2011). As a result, the students' command in English is not satisfactory.

The area of this study is particular at Narathiwat Technical College in Narathiwat province, southern part of Thailand. Narathiwat Technical College is the biggest college in Narathiwat and it promotes success in both areas of academics and career development. Besides, the students come from different backgrounds. The uniqueness of students in this province is language. The majority of the students have to learn four languages; Thai, Malay, Arabic, and English. They believe that among these four languages, English is the least important to them because they do not use in their daily life (Jehdo, 2009). Furthermore, students think they study English

for the sake of passing the examination. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the students' perceptions towards learning English at Narathiwat Technical College.

Problem Statement

Narathiwat Technical College is one branch of Princess of Naradhiwas University whereby the majority of students are Muslim. The students who choose to study in this college basically focus on area of career development. English is one of the most difficult subjects for them. At the same time, English is a compulsory subject that they are required to fulfil and pass examination. English is also the subject that majority of the students in this college fail in examination compared to other subjects. With regard to this the Office of Vocational Education Commission (2008) reported that vocational and technical college students have limited abilities in listening, speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language. Additionally, it has been found that Thai technical students' achievements are very poor in all four skills. They do not realize how important the English language is. This is because there is not any motivation for them in learning English (Boonrangsri, 2004).

There are serious problems concerning the standard of English language in Thailand. According to the result of the English Proficiency Index (EPI) 2018 under Education First (EF), Thailand was ranked 64 out of 88 countries (see Table 1).

Table 1
English Proficiency Index 2018

Ranking	Country Names	Proficiency
3	Singapore	Very High
14	Philippines	High
22	Malaysia	High
41	Vietnam	Moderate
51	Indonesia	Low
64	Thailand	Low
82	Myanmar	Very low
85	Cambodia	Very low

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EF_English_Proficiency_Index (Retrieved November, 2018)

Table 1 shows the result of the English Proficiency Index 2018 among 88 participating countries. This result showed only eight ASEAN member countries which participated in English Proficiency Index 2018. Thailand was ranked 64 out of the 88 countries which was regarded as low compared to Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

Because of the importance of English and the countless problems faced in learning and teaching English in Thailand as elaborated above, this study aimed to explore the vocational students' perceptions towards learning English at Narathiwat Technical College.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To explore students' perceptions towards learning English.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the students' perceptions towards learning English?
2. Do the students like the methods used by the English teachers?
3. What kind of teaching styles do the students prefer to use?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Narathiwat Technical College is a college where the students generally choose to learn for workforce skills. This means they would focus on the subjects concerning their major. Other subjects are only to fulfil the curriculum and pass examination. English is one of the compulsory subject that the majority of the students fail in the examination. Besides, majority of students agree that English is a difficult subject for them to learn. They are not motivated to learn English as much as their major subject. In fact, students need to adapt to an increasingly international job market and working life (Marra, 2013 & Vogt & Kantelinen, 2012) meaning that English subject should be emphasized.

Sagli (2017) conducted a study about teachers' and students' perceptions of vocational orientation in the English subject in Norway. The findings showed that English does not always match the expectations they have for their future jobs. The English subject is therefore of little relevance to the students. Therefore, it can be noted that this study showed that English does not concern with their future jobs. It is only the compulsory subject that students have to fulfil. As a result, the students seem less interested in learning the English subject.

Zou (2017) carried out his study on the cultivation of students' English autonomous learning ability in vocational colleges in Leshan city, Sichuan, China. The results indicated that most students in vocational colleges lacked of motivation, proper learning strategies, and teachers' inappropriate teaching approaches as well as by the imperfect educational system. As many studies show that teaching method is one of the important elements to improve English achievement. In other words, teaching method can attract students to pay attention on the subject. Therefore, inappropriate teaching method causes the students have low English achievement.

Sarani and Ahmadi (2013) conducted their study which aimed to investigate the English language proficiency and motivation between vocational students and non-vocational high school students in Iran. The samples of the study were 160 high school students of 2nd grade. The findings indicated that vocational students have low English proficiency and motivation. This study is in line with that of Hayikaleng, Nair and Krishnasamy (2016) who stressed that Thai students have low motivation towards learning English. As many studies maintained that motivation is one of the elements which help students to improve their English achievement.

Choosri and Intharaksa (2011) have conducted their study on the relationship between motivation and students' English learning achievement among second year vocational certificate level, Hatyai Technical College students. The results revealed that there were positive relationships between motivation and students' English learning achievement. In other words, motivation boosts students' achievement in all areas of English learning. Therefore, these findings could be useful for researchers and teachers in improving students' achievement by conducting effective teaching and learning strategies to develop students' motivation.

Yan (2016) carried out his study on the problems and countermeasures of vocational English teaching practice in higher vocational education. The results showed that there were problems in teaching and learning English among vocational students such as educational concepts, teaching modes, teaching methods, and course settings. The study tried to show that students were not satisfy with the methods used by their teacher. This study is in line with the study of Jiménez (2017) who stressed that students need several teaching methods in order to gauge students' interest.

Based on the previous studies mentioned above indicated that students have several perceptions towards learning English. However, some of the students' perceptions claimed that they did not satisfy with teaching methodology used by their English teachers. The previous studies mentioned above have conducted in foreign countries and some other parts of Thailand. For this study, the researcher would also like to focus on vocational students' perceptions towards learning English at Narathiwat Technical College which located in southern Thailand.

III. METHODOLOGY

This section provides details on participants, instruments, procedures employed in current research to answer the posed question.

Participants

This is a qualitative study using descriptive research design. The researcher used a focus group interview format (Krueger, 2000) for students to examine their performance, perceptions, and beliefs in the context of their group activities, interests and experiences. The participants of the study consist of 10 of second year vocational students majoring in electrical power from Narathiwat Technical College in Narathiwat province, southern Thailand.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview. The researcher used a focus group interview format in order to examine students' performance, perceptions, and beliefs in the context of their group activities, which referred to the interests and experiences.

Procedure

For purposes of this research was to explore the vocational students' perceptions towards learning English at Narathiwat Technical College. The researcher used the semi-structured interview since the interviewers are left with little freedom to make any modifications. This study believes that the interview would be able to provide in-depth meaning into how the students' perceptions towards learning English. The researcher selected 10 students (Krueger, 2000) based on their performance in the English language examination (College Final Examination, 2018) for this interview. Original quotes from the participants were translated back to back by experts in the field of applied linguistics, English supervisors from Narathiwat Educational Area, and English teachers from Princess of Naradhiwas University.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part reports the findings from the data collection based on the research questions. The purposes of this interview was to gain information on students' perceptions and opinions towards learning English. The researcher used a qualitative approach to examine 10 focus group students. Their responses were recorded and interpreted by the researcher.

Research question 1. What are the students' perceptions towards learning English?

This question sought students' perceptions regarding an English subject. The perceptions and opinions of the students were coded as Emerging Themes in Table 2.

Table 2

Emerging Themes from students' responses to Student's Interview Question 1

Students	Emerging Themes
Participants	Difficult, do not like, not important, not match to the future work, topics are not interesting, not use in daily life, tedious, sleepy

Table 2 shows the results of the Emerging Themes from data analysis and explains perceptions of the students in response to Student's Interview Question 1 (What are the students' perceptions towards learning English?). The findings from Student's Interview Question 1 show that the majority of students do not like an English subject. They said English is not important because they do not use it in their daily life. These extracts show that most of the students in this class were active students but because the English subject was difficult for

them, therefore, they are not motivated to learn it. Another reason was that the English subject does not match with their future work. In addition, the topics used by the teacher were not of their interest. This study is in line with the study of Sagli (2017) who stressed that English does not always match the expectations they have for their future jobs. Thus, the English subject can be very dull for them. Their main complaint was that English is difficult, not important and tedious due to uninteresting topics taught by the teachers, which made them feel bored and sleepy.

Research question 2. Do the students like the methods used by the English teachers?

Table 3

Emerging Themes from students' responses to Student's Interview Question 2

Students	Emerging Themes
Participants	Do not like conventional method, teacher based on textbook, topics are not interesting, tedious

The findings from Student's Interview Question 2 show that the majority of students do not like their teacher to use the conventional method. The teacher only based on the textbook. Moreover, the topics in the text book are not interesting. These extracts show that the method used was not interesting. Thus they felt it tedious and did not agree with the use of the conventional method. Their main complaint was the conventional method used by the teacher was uninteresting, not motivating and tedious due to uninteresting topics in the textbook which made them feel dull and sleepy. This study was also in line with the study of Yan (2016), and Zou (2017) who stressed that English teacher use inappropriate teaching methods cause the students uninterested on the lesson.

Research question 3. What kind of styles do the students prefer to use?

Table 4

Emerging Themes from students' responses to Student's Interview Question 3

Students	Emerging Themes
Participants	Using computer, study in language lab, tedious and sleepy

The majority of students claimed that they were not in favor of the conventional method used by their teacher because the method was dull and made them feel sleepy. In this situation the teacher would select some students to read sentence by sentence and repeat some verbal sounds in order to attract the students to pay more attention to the lesson. The teacher explained everything and they had to copy from the white board. The respondents also wanted their teacher to change the way of teaching to a new method like using computers and study in language labs.

V. CONCLUSION

The study which is carried out at Narathiwat Technical College by the researcher regarding the vocational students' perceptions towards learning English at Narathiwat Technical College. The results clearly show that the students do not like an English subject because it is difficult for them and they feel that English is not important as they do not use in their daily life. Moreover, the method and the topics used by the teachers were not interesting. As a result, the students felt bored and sleepy while learning. Therefore, the students expressed their feeling said that they preferred their teacher to change the way of teaching to a new method such as using computers and study in language labs. This study has implications on the teaching and learning English. The findings of this study also serve as a guide to the Teacher Training Division, English supervisors and English teachers to use different ways of teaching as important pedagogies for the teaching of English language in educational institutions.

Suggestion

In this study, the researcher used only a small sample of 10 students. Future research should engage larger samples which include technical college from different provinces in Thailand to obtain more conclusive findings which can resemble a larger population. In relation to this, the next study should use both qualitative and quantitative method in order to get more information regarding teaching and learning English subject among vocational students.

VI. Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to the Narathiwat Technical Collage for giving me permission to conduct the study. I also thank my colleagues and students for providing me with rich data and input.

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