



A Case Study of Problems in Learning English as a Foreign Language among University Students: Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology

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Abstract - Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI) has put an emphasis on the importance of learning English as a foreign language to students. All TNI students are required to enroll at least fifteen credits: nine credits as a required subject and six credits as an elective subject. They begin to take the English course from their first year enrollment and continue studying for every semester until completion. In Thailand studying and teaching English as a foreign language for university students has usually generated many problems and with different causes. TNI has tried to solve the problems by introducing the latest modern teaching approach, a learner centered teaching technique. All the instructors at TNI have applied this technique in their classrooms in order to give an opportunity to the students to express their abilities in English. The purpose of this study was to find out the problems of learning English as a foreign language and the samples were first year and second years TNI students who enrolled in the second semester of the year 2008. The finding showed that the problems of learning English were at low level, both in overall picture and in particular aspects of the curriculum and learning activities. However, personal problems were more of an issue. There are many useful suggestions from the students: more opportunity for self-study and for speaking English with foreigners. Furthermore, tour visits abroad should be arranged for the students.

Keywords - Learning English, Problems, Problems in Learning English, Second Language Learning Problems, University Students,

I. INTRODUCTION

Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI) is an academic institute which was established in 2007. One of their objectives is to provide education at undergraduate level in the field of science, technology, social sciences and humanities to students. TNI also emphasize language competency in speaking, reading and writing both in English and Japanese languages so that TNI students are competitive in international markets [1].

As for English language, TNI provides three required English subjects that are English for Communication 1, English for Communication 2, and English for Communication 3. Moreover, there is a variety of elective courses available for students who desire to continue their specific language skills.

Since 2007 TNI have begun their operations providing varieties of English courses for students. After one year of operation, this it would be the right time to conduct a survey in order to investigate problems that would occur in learning English as a foreign language among students. Consequently, this research was conducted with the objectives to investigate three main factors they are: the curriculum; teaching activities and students' personal problems. Information about students' opinions and suggestions toward the aforementioned aspects was also collected for this study.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Population and sample

The population of this study was university students who took a Bachelor degree major in Engineering, Information technology and Business administration at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology.

The sampling frame of this research consisted of first and second year students who took English for Communication 2 (ENL102) and English for Communication 4 (ENL202) in the second semester of academic year 2008. The samples of 542 students which were 60 per cent of 902 total number of students were selected by means of random sampling.

B. Research instrument

A questionnaire was self-developed and employed as the instrument of this study. It comprised three parts. The first part contains open-ended questions which were about personal information on the respondents. The second part was close-ended questions asking the respondents' opinions on problems of learning English. This contained three parts: the curriculum; learning activities and personal problems. The rating scale of this study ranged from 5 to 1 according to Likert's scale (5 represents highest, 4 represents high, 3 represents moderate, 2 represents low and 1 represents lowest). The final part was open-ended questions which were about students' opinions and suggestions on learning English.

C. Data analysis

The statistical Package for Social Science/Personal Computer Plus (SPAA/PC+) version was used to statistically analyze the data to ascertain frequency, percentage, mean, standard division and t-test.

III. RESULT

The main findings of this study are as follows. The first part shows the level of problems in learning English relating to the curriculum, learning activities and personal problems. Secondly, the comparison of problems in learning English among different genders and years of study is stated. Thirdly, the opinions of the students towards the curriculum, learning activities, teaching materials and assessments are stated. The final part shows students' suggestions on learning English.

TABLE I : LEVEL OF PROBLEMS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

Problems in Learning English	Total (n=500)		
	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. Curriculum	2.47	0.79	Low
2. Learning activities	2.25	0.89	Low
3. Personal problems	2.56	0.96	Moderate
Total	2.42	0.88	Low

Table 1 shows that the overall problems in learning English were low. The result found that the problems in learning English regarding the curriculum and learning activities were low. However, the personal problems level was moderate.

TABLE II : COMPARISON OF GENDER RELATED TO PROBLEMS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

Problems in Learning English	Gender				MD	t	P
	Male		Female				
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
1. Curriculum	2.34	0.80	2.50	0.78	-0.17	2.35	0.02*
2. Learning activities	2.19	0.84	2.30	0.80	-0.10	1.40	0.13
3. Personal problems	2.52	0.95	2.59	0.99	-0.08	0.89	0.38
Total	2.36	0.76	2.48	0.71	-0.12	1.78	0.08

Table 2. The overall problems in learning English between male and female were not significantly different. However, the finding showed that problems in learning English relating to the curriculum aspect were significantly different among male and female students. While, the problems in learning which relate to learning activities and personal problems showed no difference among male and female students.

TABLE III : COMPARISON OF YEAR OF STUDY RELATED TO PROBLEMS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

Problems in Learning English	Year of study				MD	t	P
	First year		Second year				
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
1. Curriculum	2.39	0.79	2.53	0.77	-0.15	1.59	0.11
2. Learning activities	2.24	0.83	2.74	0.77	-0.00	0.02	0.99
3. Personal problems	2.55	0.98	2.57	0.93	-0.02	0.19	0.85
Total	2.40	0.75	2.46	0.69	-0.06	0.75	0.45

According to table 3 the overall problems in learning English among first and second year students were not significantly different. The study found that problems in learning English related to the curriculum aspect, learning activities and personal problems showed no significant difference among first and second year students.

TABLE IV : FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF OPINIONS ABOUT CURRICULUM

Opinions about Curriculum	Frequency	Percentage
1. Curriculum is appropriate because it contains current affairs relating to daily life both at home and at university. Moreover, the contents of the text book are not too difficult to understand.	168	53.16
2. Curriculum is inappropriate because contents are too easy and out-of-date which are not suitable for university students.	49	15.51
3. Too many supplementary exercises which are not related to the contents of the text book used.	41	12.97
4. Others	58	18.36
Total	316	100.00

Table 4 shows the frequency of 168 respondents or 53.16 per cent of the total number expressing that the curriculum was appropriate because it contains current affairs which closely relates to their daily lives both at home and at university. Moreover, the contents were not too difficult to understand. However, the rest of the participants showed negative opinions.

TABLE V : FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF OPINIONS ABOUT LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Opinions about Learning Activities	Frequency	Percentage
1. Instructors use good techniques and varieties of teaching methods	164	77.73
2. Low teaching techniques are employed by instructors	21	9.95
3 Others	26	12.32
Total	211	100.00

According to table 5 the frequency of 164 respondents or 77.73 per cent of the total number expressed their opinions on learning activities that instructors employed good teaching techniques and varieties of teaching methods.

TABLE VI : FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF OPINIONS ABOUT TEACHING MATERIALS

Opinions about Teaching materials	Frequency	Percentage
1. Good and suitable teaching material, for example singing songs and using Power Point	52	40.94
2. Teaching materials are in a small numbers, boring and poor quality	45	35.43
3 Others	30	23.63
Total	127	100.00

Table 6 states the frequency of 52 respondents which is 40.94 per cent of the total number expressing their opinions that the teaching materials were good and suitable for them, for example singing activities were used to learn new vocabulary, and Power Point, a computer software, was employed to further expand grammatical aspects in order to assist weak students. The rest of the students show negative opinions.

TABLE VII : FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF OPINIONS ABOUT ASSESSMENTS

Opinions about Assessments	Frequency	Percentage
1. Appropriate methods of assessments	148	68.20
2. Assessments are not related to the contents of the text book	24	11.06
3. Others	45	20.74
Total	217	100.00

From table 7 the frequency of 148 participants which is 68.20 per cent of the total number shows that the assessments used were appropriate and related to the text books.

TABLE VIII : FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF OPINIONS ABOUT LEARNING ENGLISH

Opinions about Learning English	Frequency	Percentage
1. Too many supplementary exercises, especially vocabulary exercises (Word Bank)	46	65.71
2. Others	24	34.29
Total	70	100.00

Table 8 shows that the frequency of 46 participants which is 65.71 per cent of the total number expressing their opinions about learning English mentioned that there were too many supplementary exercises, especially vocabulary exercises which is called a Word Bank.

TABLE IX : FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF SUGGESTIONS ABOUT LEARNING ENGLISH

Suggestions about Learning English	Frequency	Percentage
1. Emphasis practical speaking activities, not grammatical lessons	15	19.74
2. Vocabulary exercises (Word Bank) should be cancelled.	10	13.17
3. Longer period of time with foreign instructors should be extended	10	13.17
4. Others	41	53.92
Total	76	100.00

From table 9, the frequency of 15 participants which is 19.74 per cent of the total number suggested that practical speaking activities should be more frequently organized in classrooms. The 13.17 per cent suggested that period of time with foreign instructors should be extended and the vocabulary exercises (Word Bank) should be cancelled.

IV. DISCUSSION

The result of this research showed the problems in learning English as a foreign language relating to three aspects of the curriculum, learning activities and personal problems which are shown as follows:

This study found low level of problems regarding the curriculum and teaching activities. This could be because of a number of reasons.

Firstly, TNI conducted many studies in many occasions before the actual curriculum was formed [2]. For example, a selection of suitable text book, an investigation of teaching activities and suitable materials which could assist students to improve their English competence.

Secondly, educational seminars were organized by TNI in order to provide and update new concepts of teaching and learning techniques; for example, a learner centered technique, to instructors both in foreign language section and other departments. This approach was strongly advised to all instructors to employ in their classroom activities [3].

Finally, TNI also encouraged all instructors to pay attention on providing diverse and interesting teaching materials since they are one of the important learning activities. This is related to the research study of Somnuk Deehasingha (2003:12) which found that interesting and suitable teaching materials are the most important element of successful English teaching. Since students could relate their daily lives situation with classroom activities [4].

It is interesting to learn that female students had more problems in learning English than male learners. This is probably due to the fact that female students possess lower level of self-adjustment than male which was quoted in the study of Ratre Pongsuwan (1997:79) [5].



V. CONCLUSIONS

The research showed low problems in learning English of TNI students in terms of the curriculum and learning activities. In addition, there are many useful suggestions from the students suggesting that speaking activities are more important than grammatical lessons since practical speaking practices can help them to develop communicative skills in their daily lives. The result of this research helps teachers in planning more efficient teaching styles next year.

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