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English Language Competence of Thai School Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The recent policy of the current Thai government to drive Thailand toward the digital economy (Thailand 4.0) requires that Thai citizens are capable using English to engage in a myriad of online business activities. However, are Thai teachers ready to help turn this policy into reality? This study investigated Thai teachers' English language competence and their use of English. A total of 175 Thai teachers self-assessed their English language ability via questionnaires during March and April 2017. The teachers were those from two public schools under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and in-service teachers taking a course leading to a graduate diploma in teaching profession. Results showed that the majority of Thai teachers rated their English performance as being low, but their need to use English was at an average level. Teachers with BAs and those with MAs did not significantly differ in their English language competence and use. It was also revealed that their English language competence affected their ability to integrate English in other subjects. The majority of Thai teachers expressed their desire to undergo English language training and urged greater support from the government and the school administration.

1. Introduction

As English is considered a global language and the primary language of international business (Crystal, 2003), Thai governments have been working hard to improve Thai English language skills, realizing that low level English skills are detrimental to a strong and sustainable economy. This realization has been supported by many studies. For example, Education First (2017) studied that better English skills correlate with higher income as well as a better quality of life. In fact, according to Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter, English is the only 'working language', which makes it imperative for Thailand to prepare its citizens in ways that enable them to use English to engage with ASEAN countries and the world at large. However, the Thai ranking in English skills remains low (Education First, 2017). The recent policy of the present Thai government to drive Thailand toward the digital economy or Thailand 4.0 requires that Thai citizens are capable of using English to engage in a myriad of online business and social activities. In addition, the World Bank has urged Thailand to improve its education and the skills of its labor, citing that this is necessary should Thailand wish to break away from the middle-income trap (World Bank, 2017).

Language is not just a system of signs; it is loaded with values and capital. English is a language with symbolic power. In practice, English is indeed one of the keys to national development. So far, Thailand has not been able to significantly upgrade its standing in English competence. A few years before the commencement of the ASEAN community, it was argued that Thai citizens might be at a disadvantage if their English was not improved (Thanthong--Knight and DPA, 2013). To be fair, Thailand has been putting a great deal of energy and effort into the improvement of Thai students' English language skills.

In education, one of the keys to national development is the role of school teachers. The quality of teachers significantly determines the quality of students (The Center for Public Education, 2005). Research shows that Thai school teachers needed more training to develop facilitation skills (Sinlarat and Thadphoothon, 2016). Considering the fact that Thailand has an official policy to improve its quality of education to prepare its citizens for the digital era, the English language ability of the teachers matters. However, Thailand lacks research concerning the English preparedness of Thai school teachers. This research aims to bridge that gap.

The aim of this research is to investigate the English language

competence of Thai school teachers and their use of the language.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English in Thailand

In the past, English was considered an elite language spoken only among the educated and ruling classes (Thadphoothon, 2010). Even though the status of English has gradually changed, English is still the language acquired by people in higher education and in big cities. In Thailand, English is regarded as a foreign language. Despite the fact that English is being taught to primary, secondary, and university students, the overall result has been disappointing. The poor English language ability of Thai students, in general, has been cited as one of the country's weaknesses that hinders its development (Pitsuwan, 2013). The English skills in Thailand are among the lowest in global rankings (Education First, 2017). An earlier review of the literature pointed to several causes including unqualified and poorly-trained teachers leading to poorly-motivated students (Dhanasobhon, 2006; ONEC, 2003, cited in Noom-ura, 2013: p. 139). Other reasons include poor teaching methods (Punthumasan, 2007), attitudes toward foreign languages (Wiriyaichitra, 2004), and Thailand's language policy (Thadphoothon, 2016).

2.2 Thai School Teachers and Their English Skills

Previous research showed that Thai school teachers needed more professional development opportunities (Sinlarat and Thadphoothon, 2016). A recent study also noted that Thailand lacked qualified English teachers (Noom-Ura, 2013). Thai school teachers in general are not required to speak English with their students. Increasingly, some Thai schools are offering English programs as alternatives for Thai students, so the language of instruction in some schools is English. Many schools encourage their teachers to integrate English into other subjects.

3. Method

The data were collected from 175 Thai school teachers from two public schools under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the in-service teachers taking a course leading to a graduate diploma in teaching. The questionnaires entail six sections: (1) general information, (2) self-assessment of English competence, (3) English language needs, (4) Language Use, (5) Attitudes and Beliefs about the English Language, and (6) Obstacles to Language Development. The data collection was carried

out in March and April 2017. The research tools were the questionnaires. Data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics, namely, frequency, mean, percent, standard deviation, and T-test.

4. Findings

Table 1: Basic data of the respondents

Characteristics		Number	Percent
Gender	Female	131	74.86
	Male	44	25.14
Total		175	100
Age	18-27 years old	50	28.57
	28-37 years old	63	36.00
	38-47 years old	32	18.29
	48-57 years old	20	11.43
	58-or older	10	5.71
Total		175	100
Education	BA	139	79.43
	MA	34	19.43
	Doctoral	2	1.14
Total		175	100

Table 1 shows the basic characteristics of the teacher respondents. Of the 175 teachers, 131 of them (74.86%) were female. The majority of the teachers were between 18-47 (82.86%). Only 10

(5.71%) were 58 or above. In terms of education, the majority of the respondents were BA holders (79.43%). Only two of them (1.14%) held a doctoral degree.

Table 2: English Competence of the Teachers

Domain	N	Mean	S.D.
Speaking skills	175	2.45	.855
Listening skills	175	2.51	.823
Readingskills	175	2.67	.789
Writing skills	175	2.50	.809
Grammar & Vocabulary	175	2.43	.776
Translation skills	175	2.44	.855
Average	175	2.50	.74

Table 2 shows the respondents' English language competence based on their self-assessment. On average, their English language ability was rated to be at a low level (Mean = 2.50).

Table 3: Differences between Existing English Competence and Demand

Pair	N	Means	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
1 Speaking skills	175	2.45	.85	-10.31	.00
Need for speaking skills	175	3.30	1.10		
2 Listening skills	175	2.51	.82	-8.94	.00
Need for listening skills	175	3.26	1.11		
3 Reading skills	175	2.67	.78	-6.88	.00
Need for readingskills	175	3.26	1.08		
4 Writing skills	175	2.50	.80	-6.75	.00
Need for writingskills	175	3.09	1.10		
5 Translation skills	175	2.44	.85	-8.99	.00
Need for translationskills	175	3.19	1.14		

Table 3 shows the mean differences between the existing English

competence and their need to use those skills. For each pair compared, it was found that the mean was significantly different at the .01 level.

When English teachers and non-English teachers were compared, it was found that Thai English and Non-English teachers differed in their English language competence and language use. English teachers said they were more competent and used more English.

Table 4: English Use and Needs between Low and High Competence Teachers

English Use	N	Means	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Low Competence	90	1.95	.69	-8.47	.00
High Competence	16	3.53	.65		
English Needs	N	Means	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Low Competence	90	2.88	1.00	-14.36	.00
High Competence	16	4.18	.65		

It was found that teachers with a higher English competence reported that they used English more and said that they needed to use English more frequently when compared with teachers with a lower level of language competence.

Table 5: English competence and English use

I like English.	N	Means	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Low Competence	90	3.58	.99	-3.50	.00
High Competence	16	4.50	.81		
I have a conversation with foreign teachers.	N	Means	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Low Competence	90	1.98	.971	-8.37	.00
High Competence	16	4.19	.981		
I teach other subjects that I teach.	N	Means	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)

Table 5.cont					
Low Competence	90	2.47	1.030	-5.18	.00
High Competence	16	3.88	.806		
I speak with my students in English.	N	Means	SD	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Low Competence	90	2.20	.93	-6.98	.00
High Competence	16	3.94	.77		

Table 5 shows the profiles of teachers with low and high levels of English competence. In terms of liking, the teachers with high-level competence of English had more positive attitudes toward English (Mean = 4.50). When compared with teachers with lower English language competence, teachers with a high level of English competence said they engaged more in conversations with foreign teachers, communicated more in English with their students, and integrated more English into other subjects.

5. Discussions

5.1 English language competence

Based on self-assessment, the English language competence of Thai school teachers was the result of their own evaluation of language ability. One hundred and seventy-five Thai school teachers rated their own English competence as being at a low level (Mean = 2.50). This perception may not represent the total population of Thai school teachers across the country (about 400,000 of them). However, the result was supported by the evaluation of Thai citizens' English proficiency by Education First (2017), which ranked Thailand in the lower quartiles. This finding may not be considered a big surprise, considering the fact that even among Thai English teachers, English proficiency was found to be a source of anxiety (Klanrit and Sroinam, 2012).

5.2 English language use

The use of the English among Thai school teachers was strictly limited to the classroom context. Thai school teachers rarely used English to write letters. They rarely read English books, reports, or emails. They also

rarely did translation work and conversed in English with other Thai teachers. Males and females did not differ significantly in terms of the frequency of their English use. However, Thai English teachers used more English than school teachers. An earlier study showed that Thai English teachers were reluctant to use English in the classroom (Klanrit and Sroinam, 2012) and grammar- translation is still dominant instructional model (Punthumasen, 2007).

It was revealed that the teachers' English competence was behind their need to use the language. This may point to a big gap in professional development (Sinlarat and Thadphoothon, 2016). The teachers also requested that the government and the school authorities provide greater opportunities for them to improve their English language skills. A heavy workload and time were cited as the primary obstacles to improving their language development.

5.3 Effects of English language competence

Teachers with a high level of English competence were those who were keen to integrate English into the subjects they taught and were active in language use. They chatted more in English with students, read more books, and conversed in English with foreign teachers. As for teachers with a low level of competence, they recognized that they had problems with their English; their attitudes towards English were neutral. When they speak English, they were less confident compared with those with higher English competence.

5.4 English Language Training and Development

It was clear from this research that Thai school teachers need more training to improve their English skills. However, they said that they had no time because they had a lot of work to do. Therefore, authorities and policy makers should support them with time and resources so that they have opportunities to develop their English. In addition, since school teachers believe that teachers should speak in English to students as often as possible, it is feasible to encourage both teacher and students to engage more in academic activities in English. Teachers believe that the best way to learn English is to practice the language. With the advent of the Internet and smartphone technologies, there are even more opportunities to learn English. Indeed, Thai school teachers can learn English on the go, through applications on smartphones.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated Thai school teachers' English language competence and their use of English. Based on the self-assessment of 175 teachers, it was found that their level of English competence was at a low level, but their need to use the language was at an average level. Their use of English was limited by their humble proficiency. Teachers with high competence conversed more in English with their students and infused more English in the subjects they taught. Teachers would like the authorities to support them in the development of their English language skills. The three important obstacles hindering them from developing their language skills are the workload, available time, and opportunities to use English.

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