

English Language Teaching Practices in Thailand as Perceived by Graduate Student Teachers

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[Abstract] This study focuses on English Language Teaching (ELT) practices in Thailand. A group of student teachers responded to a survey regarding ELT practices. The results indicated that student teachers perceived the practices involved a combination of various methods. Both the practices in line with recent methods and the ones reflecting more traditional practices were reported at a high frequency level. For the practices perceived at a moderate level, it is recommended that ELT graduate programs design a course syllabus for ELT methodology courses to include the repertoire of different teaching practices under various existing ELT approaches and methods.

[Keywords] English language teaching practices, English language teaching methodology, English teachers, graduate student teachers

Introduction

As teachers play the main role in the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE)'s reforms and efforts, there has been a greater need for more qualified Thai English teachers. To comply with the MOE's objectives of teaching English, many in-service and pre-service Thai English teachers are now facing a number of challenges, one of which is to drastically change their teaching practices. As stated by Kanoksilapatham (2007), after local training in English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology, local English teachers can continue with their teaching independently. To cope with the challenges, many Thai English teachers are attending ELT graduate programs offered in various Thai tertiary institutions. They hope to gain greater understanding of ELT practices and apply what they learn to benefit their students.

To help develop more effective ELT methodology courses for these student teachers, it is necessary to give them a chance to reflect on what they perceive as current ELT practices in Thai classrooms. This study, thus, aims to investigate the perceptions of graduate student teachers towards current ELT practices in Thailand. Findings from this study can serve as a useful input to inform graduate programs in ELT on what their student teachers perceive as ELT practices in Thailand. In line with this viewpoint, the study gives suggestions in regard to what should be included in an ELT methodology course to provide appropriate training for graduate student teachers. The results obtained from this study provide valuable insights for ELT teacher trainers in designing a syllabus for ELT methodology courses in their ELT graduate programs and for researchers to conduct future studies to better understand the phenomena revealed in the present study.

Literature Review

A Brief History of Language Teaching Methods

During the mid-1880s to the mid-1980s, there was a search for a single, ideal method that could be generalized across widely varying audiences that would successfully teach students a foreign language in the classroom (Brown, 2002). The change in approaches to language teaching is generally a response to an increased demand for using a second and foreign language resulting from large-scale movement of people through immigration, the internationalization of education, globalization, the rise of the Internet, and the global spread of English (Richard & Rodgers, 2014). Different language teaching methods have been used in different contexts at different times.

In the same way, in the long history of ELT, teachers have tried various methods available, starting from traditional methods, such as the Grammar Translation Method and the Direct Method, to the Audiolingual Method and the Situational Method, then to more recent ones like the Communicative Language Teaching model. These methods and their supporters have a common belief that their ways of teaching are more effective than the others.

Recently, ELT practices have been seen differently. We are living in “the post-methods era” (Brown, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2003), and ELT practices are seen more as a combination of many different methods of teaching and learning approaches. Brown’s (2002) “a principled approach,” Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) “three pedagogic parameters” (particularity, practicality, and possibility), Ur’s (2014) “a language pedagogy,” and Richard and Rodgers’s (2014) “a post-methods approach” provide teachers with such flexibility in ELT practices. Brown (2002) states that teachers do not need a new method; instead, they need to get on with the business of unifying their own principled approach to language teaching and of designing effective tasks and techniques informed by the selected approach. According to Kumaravadivelu (2012), a pedagogy deriving from the concept of a post-method informed by the three pedagogic parameters is generated by teachers who are sensitive to local needs, wants, and situations and is based on the lived experience of learners and teachers. He further noted, “Confronted with the complexities of their everyday teaching, and frustrated with established methods, teachers see no option but to try to invent an ‘eclectic method’ that might work for them” (p.2).

English Language Teaching in Thailand: An Overview

In Thailand, teachers of English have long been expected to follow Western-led prescriptive teaching methods introduced by the MOE. In common with ELT practices in other countries, ELT practices in Thailand have been swinging from one method to another since the first Thai National Education Act in 1921 (Foley, 2005; Methitham, 2014). In the same way, the assumption behind the replacing one method with another is to find the method that best fits the Thai ELT context.

English was first taught using the rote learning tradition of Thai culture under the infamous Grammar Translation Method. Later, in 1960 (during the Indochina War), with the need to use English for the purpose of international communication, there was an attempt to replace the Grammar Translation Method with the Audiolingual Method. Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Communicative Method first started to play its role, and in 1996, the Functional-Communicative Approach (Wongsothorn, 2000) was used as a method of teaching. Since the 1999 Education Act and, later, the 2002 National Education Curriculum, there has been a shift from teacher-centered methods to learner-centered methods, emphasizing independent work, autonomous learning, and self-access (Section 24, Thai National Act 1999, as cited in Baker,

2008).

To meet the demand of the challenges of globalization and to improve the standard of ELT practices in Thailand, the Thai government has expanded the important role of foreign languages in the school curriculum. In the Basic Education Core Curriculum (BEC) 2008, the MOE put a foreign language as one of the eight core learning subjects, and English is required to be taught as a core language for communicative purposes through the four main areas: Language for Communication, Language and Culture, Language and Relationship with Other Learning Areas, and Language and Relationship with Community and the World (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Based on the BEC 2008, there has been a shift from a traditional English (teacher-centered, textbook-directed, and grammar-focused) teaching method to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (with a learner-centered, content-based, and integrated-skill curriculum. The new curriculum aims at developing the learners' capacity to use English for communicative purposes through their needs, goals, interests, learning styles, and strategies) (Renandya et al., 1999).

To comply with the establishment of the 2015 ASEAN Economic Community, in 2014 the MOE further announced the latest policy with the use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in conjunction with CLT to be adopted at all levels of the Thai school system (Ministry of Education, 2014). The guidelines provided by the MOE go hand in hand with the CEFR framework to benchmark communicative language ability in reading, writing, speaking, and listening through the 3 language levels: basic users Level A, independent users Level B, and proficient users Level C (Council of Europe, 2001). The MOE aims to equip Thai English learners with the following proficiencies of English language skills: Grade 6/A1 proficiency, Grade 9/A2 proficiency, and Grade 12/B1 proficiency (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Method

Participants

The study involved 46 student teachers enrolling in an ELT graduate program in a university in Bangkok, Thailand. Thirty-five participants (76.09%) were female, and eleven (23.91%) were male. The age range was from 21 to 50 years old. Thirty-eight of them (82.61%) were at the ages between 21 to 30 years old and seven of them (15.21%) were at the ages between 31 to 40 years old. Only one participant (2.17%) was over 41 years old. All participants (100%) graduated with a Bachelor's degree. They all also had English teaching experience. While twenty of them (43.48%) had 3 to 5 years of experience, eighteen (39.13%) had 1 to 2 years of experience. Only eight of them (17.39%) had more than five years of experience. They taught at different levels. The majority (56.52%) taught at the secondary school level. Nine (19.57%) taught at the elementary school level, and the others (23.91%) taught at different levels of students: five (10.87%) taught at both elementary and secondary school levels, two (4.35%) at both secondary school and college/university levels, and four (8.70%) taught at all levels (elementary school, secondary school, and college/university).

Research Question

The aim of this study was to explore what ELT practices were observed among Thai English teachers by student teachers in an ELT graduate program. To achieve this goal, this study answered the following research question: What are the perceptions of student teachers enrolling in an ELT graduate program towards ELT practices in Thailand?

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part A asked the respondents their background information, such as gender, age, level of education, year of teaching experience, and level of teaching. Part B contains 44 five-level Likert items in terms of typical ELT practices based on various existing methods.

The items were compiled from a literature review on ELT (Brown, 2007; Davies & Pearse, 2008; Hall, 2011; Harmer, 2013; Larsen-Freeman 2000; McKay, 2002; Nunan, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Fourteen items asked about Thai English teachers' use of different classroom teaching and learning activities (Items 17, 22-29, and 33-37). Eight items were related to the use of English and Thai in the classroom (Items 1-5, 18-20, 21). Five items asked about the teaching of grammar (Items 12-16). Four were about the teaching of the four skills (Items 8-11). Three items each focused on the use of course textbooks (Items 6, 7, 30) and the correction of errors (Items 40-42). Two items each were concerned with the teaching of cultures (Items 31-32), the use of information and communication technology (Items 38-39), and the assessment (Items 43-44).

Data Collection

The participants were asked to indicate the teaching practices they perceived were typically used in Thai ELT classrooms by choosing their agreement levels.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed by means of a statistical analysis using the SPSS to get the means, standard deviations, and levels of agreement for the answers to determine the respondents' perceptions of ELT practices used by Thai English teachers.

Results

A Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated to ensure the internal reliability of the respondents' responses to the questionnaire. A Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.996 was obtained.

The data obtained from the 44 items in Part B of the questionnaire were calculated into means and standard deviations and distributed into three levels of agreement as suggested by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002): high (an average score of 3.5 or higher); moderate (an average score of 2.5 to 3.4); and low (an average score of 2.4 or lower).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Levels of Agreement of Teaching Practices Perceived by Student Teachers

| Teaching Practices | M | SD | Level of Agreement |
|---|----------|-----------|---------------------------|
| 1. Teach English in English. | 3.20 | 1.20 | Moderate |
| 2. Teach English in Thai. | 3.67 | 1.01 | High |
| 3. Use Thai in class as appropriate. | 3.83 | 1.06 | High |
| 4. Allow students to speak English only when they feel they are ready to. | 3.13 | 1.15 | Moderate |

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| 5. Require students to speak only English beginning the first day of class. | 2.57 | 1.09 | Moderate |
| 6. Use course textbook and follow it closely. | 3.33 | 1.08 | Moderate |
| 7. Design their own teaching materials to fit the teaching context. | 3.74 | 1.10 | High |
| 8. Give priority to listening and speaking skills. | 3.26 | 1.18 | Moderate |
| 9. Give priority to reading and writing skills. | 3.80 | 0.93 | High |
| 10. Teach the four English skills integratively. | 3.33 | 1.10 | Moderate |
| 11. Integrate English language teaching through content teaching with emphasis on comprehension. | 3.52 | 0.81 | High |
| 12. Present a particular grammatical point only when necessary. | 3.09 | 1.13 | Moderate |
| 13. Teach grammatical points by increasing levels of complexity. | 4.04 | 0.79 | High |
| 14. Analyze grammatical structures of difficult sentences. | 3.70 | 0.99 | High |
| 15. Teach grammar through explicit rules and grammar-focused exercises. | 4.02 | 0.95 | High |
| 16. Teach grammar by giving examples of grammatical structures before explaining the grammar rules. | 3.43 | 1.11 | High |
| 17. Use pattern drilling activities such as guided repetition and substitution exercises. | 3.87 | 0.88 | High |
| 18. Use native-like pronunciation practice exercises. | 3.24 | 1.14 | Moderate |
| 19. Use a variety of accents in listening activities. | 2.93 | 1.10 | Moderate |
| 20. Use translation exercises. | 3.37 | 1.02 | Moderate |
| 21. Restate students' Thai message into English. | 3.26 | 0.98 | Moderate |
| 22. Use literature and experiential learning to teach English. | 3.20 | 1.02 | Moderate |
| 23. Analyze different text-types. | 3.07 | 1.04 | Moderate |
| 24. Use vocabulary lists. | 4.20 | 0.78 | High |
| 25. Use corpora-based activities such as teaching strategies to deal with multi-word units or chunks. | 2.98 | 1.13 | Moderate |
| 26. Teach language learning strategies. | 3.22 | 1.15 | Moderate |
| 27. Use music-based activities to create deep relaxation atmosphere. | 3.37 | 1.18 | Moderate |
| 28. Have students respond to commands physically. | 3.54 | 0.96 | High |
| 29. Use activities such as commands, questions and visual cues to encourage responses. | 3.85 | 0.87 | High |
| 30. Use real-life materials to supplement course textbook. | 3.78 | 1.15 | High |
| 31. Teach cultures of English-speaking people in order to help students use English appropriately in a particular context. | 3.72 | 0.96 | High |
| 32. Teach multi-cultures and world issues to help | 3.37 | 1.18 | Moderate |

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| students communicate with people from other countries. | | | |
| 33. Use acquisition activities such as role plays, games, simulations, presentations and other performance-oriented activities focusing on exchange of meaningful information. | 3.83 | 1.00 | High |
| 34. Use gestures, objects, facial expressions and realia to communicate meanings in a “direct” way. | 3.63 | 0.85 | High |
| 35. Use grouping techniques such as pair work, small group, etc., to encourage collaborative group learning. | 3.93 | 1.00 | High |
| 36. Focus on form combined with meaning-oriented activities through task-based and student-generated projects. | 3.30 | 1.09 | Moderate |
| 37. Use a wide variety of classroom learning activities where students can work appropriately according to their needs and interests. | 3.43 | 1.19 | High |
| 38. Use information and communication technology to facilitate student learning. | 3.87 | 0.98 | High |
| 39. Use information and communication technology to demonstrate student learning. | 3.72 | 0.83 | High |
| 40. Correct students’ errors by providing explanations as to why they are incorrect. | 3.74 | 1.04 | High |
| 41. Correct students’ errors indirectly by correctly repeating back to them. | 3.70 | 1.03 | High |
| 42. Tolerate students’ errors and see them as a normal phenomenon in the development of communicative skills. | 3.26 | 1.10 | Moderate |
| 43. Focus on explicit measurable outcomes based on benchmark systems and framework. | 3.35 | 0.95 | Moderate |
| 44. Assess students using portfolio. | 3.11 | 1.06 | Moderate |
| | 3.49 | 1.08 | High |

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and levels of agreement of ELT practices in Thailand as perceived by the participants. As evident in the table, the participants perceived Thai English teachers used the stipulated teaching practices at a high frequency level ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.08$). The means of individual teaching practice items ranged from 4.20 ($SD = 0.78$): item 24, “Use vocabulary lists” at the high level(to 2.57 ($SD = 1.09$): item 5, “Require students to speak only English beginning the first day of class” at the moderate level(.

In terms of levels of agreement, 23 out of the 44 teaching practice items in the questionnaire)52.27%(were ranked within the high level, while the other 21 items)47.73%(fell within the moderate level.

Looking specifically at individual teaching practice items, several interesting patterns emerged. When asked to rate their agreement on the use of English and Thai in the classroom, both Item 2, “Teach English in Thai” and Item 3, “Use Thai in class as appropriate” were agreed to be at the high level while Item 1, “Teach English in English,” Item 4, “Allow students to speak English when they feel they are ready to,” and Item 5, “Require students to speak only English

beginning the first day of class” were rated at the moderate level. This is supported by the participants’ perceptions at the moderate level concerning the use of native-like pronunciation practice exercises)Item 18(, the use of a variety of accents in listening activities)Item 19(, the use of translation exercises)Item 20(, and the restatement of students’ Thai messages into English)Item 21(.

The use of course textbooks also indicates an interesting pattern. The participants rated Item 6, “Use course textbook and follow it closely” at the moderate level, while they perceived Item 7, “Design their own materials to fit the teaching context” and Item 30, “Use real-life materials to supplement course textbook” at the high level.

In terms of the teaching of the four skills, the participants perceived Thai English teachers’ giving priority to reading and writing)Item 9(and integrating English language teaching through content teaching with emphasis on comprehension)Item 11(at the high level, but they perceived giving priority to listening and speaking)Item 8(and teaching the four skills integratively)Item 10(at the moderate level.

Another pattern which emerged can be seen in the items concerning the teaching of grammar. The participants believed that Thai English teachers were teaching grammatical points by increasing the level of complexity)Item 13(and analyzing grammatical structures of difficult sentences)Item 14(frequently)at the high level(while presenting a particular grammatical point only when necessary)Item 12(was perceived at the moderate level. The participants, however, reported a high number of instances of teachers’ teaching grammar both through explicit rules and grammar focused exercises)Item 15(and by giving examples of grammatical structures before explaining the grammar rules)Item 16(.

An encouraging result seen from the analyzed data is Thai English teachers’ use of a wide variety of classroom leaning activities in which students can work appropriately according to their needs and interests)Item 37(, which was perceived at the high level. This perception is supported by the participants’ reporting of a high frequency level in the use of different classroom learning and teaching activities as seen in Item 17, “Use pattern drilling activities such guided repetition and substitution exercises,”

Item 24, “Use vocabulary lists,” Item 28, “Have students respond to commands physically,” Item 29, “Have students respond to commands, questions and visual cues to encourage responses,” Item 33, “Use acquisition activities such as role plays, games, simulations, presentations and other performance-oriented activities focusing on exchange of meaningful information,” Item 34, “Use gestures, objects, facial expressions and realia to communicate meaning in a ‘direct’ way,” and Item 35, “Use grouping techniques such as pair work, small group, etc., to encourage collaborative group learning.” Item 22, “Use literature and experiential learning to teach English,” Item 23, “Analyze different text types,” Item 25, “Use corpora-based activities such as teaching strategies to deal with multi-word units or chunk,”

Item 26, “Teach language learning strategies,” Item 27, “Use music-based activities to create deep relaxation atmosphere,” and Item 36, “Focus on form combined with meaning-oriented activities through task-based and student-generated projects” were, however, utilized at the moderate level.

It is also interesting to see from the analyzed data that Thai English teachers were perceived as using information and communication technology at the high level to both facilitate)Item 38(and demonstrate)Item 39(student learning.

For correction of errors, correcting students' errors by both providing explanation as to why they are incorrect)Item 40(and correctly repeating back to them)Item 41(were perceived at the high level; however, tolerating errors and seeing them as a normal phenomenon in the development of communicative skills)Item 42(was perceived at the moderate level.

For assessment, Thai English teachers were reported as focusing on explicit, measurable outcomes based on benchmark systems and framework)Item 43(and to assess students using portfolio)Item 44(at the moderate level.

Last of all, when asked about the teaching of cultures, the participants believed Thai English teachers' teaching about the cultures of English-speaking people in order to help students use English appropriately in a particular context)Item 31(was at the high level, while teaching multi-cultures and world issues to help students communicate with people from other countries)Item 32(was perceived to be at the moderate level.

Discussion of Findings

The study attempts to gain insights into ELT graduate student teachers' perceptions of Thai English teachers' teaching practices. The teaching practice items in the questionnaire were reported either at the high or the moderate level.

For the items with usage at the high level, Thai English teachers were not seen as using any specific teaching method. They seem to combine both recent and more traditional teaching practices in the classroom. This is confirmed in the result of the top five teaching practices, which shows that besides the use of older style vocabulary lists, the teaching of grammar through explicit rules and grammar-focused exercises and the use of pattern drilling activities, Thai English teachers were also perceived to be using grouping techniques and information and communication technology to facilitate student learning.

For the teaching of grammar, it is noticeable that the teaching of grammar through explicit rules and grammar-focused exercises were reported at the same high level as teaching grammar by giving examples of grammatical structure before explaining the grammar rules and analyzing grammatical structures of difficult sentences. The perception of teaching grammar both deductively and inductively at the same high level seems encouraging. This shows that Thai English teachers put focus not only on communicative-based but also on form-focused teaching.

For error correction, Thai English teachers were also rated highly both at correctly repeating back to students and at correcting students' errors, thus providing explanation as to why they were incorrect.

Among the items concerning Thai English teachers' use of different classroom learning and teaching activities, the results of the high agreement items show that Thai English teachers are moving away from teacher-centered methods. The teachers' having students respond to commands physically, employing commands, questions, and visual cues to encourage responses, use of acquisition activities, such as role playing, games, simulations, presentations, and other performance-oriented activities focusing on exchange of meaningful information, and the use of gestures, objects, facial expressions and realia to communicate meaning in a "direct" way were perceived to be at a high level of usage. This shows that Thai English teachers are moving towards student-centered process by getting their students to participate in the learning process, which can help motivate their students and stimulate their thinking.

The findings that Thai English teachers were believed to be putting more emphasis on designing their own materials to fit the teaching context and using real-life materials to supplement course textbooks rather than on using a course textbook and following it closely also are

encouraging. These findings, however, indicate a concern that the teachers also need skills and knowledge to be instructional designers in order to develop their own materials that are context-specific and sensitive (Kumaravedivelu, 2001; Richards, 2001) further stated, "Textbooks should be regarded as one of the many resources teachers can draw upon in creating effective lessons, but teachers need training and experience in adapting and modifying textbooks as well as in using authentic materials and in creating their own teaching materials" (p. 6). The development of teachers' own materials and the use of real-life materials to supplement course textbooks show that Thai English teachers are free to base their teaching practices on their students' needs and interests.

Some of the more traditional methods can be seen as giving priority to reading and writing skills and the teaching of English in Thai, and these techniques were perceived at the high level. However, the integration of English language teaching through content teaching with an emphasis on comprehension and the use of Thai in the classroom as appropriate were also perceived at the high level, as seen in more recent methods.

It could be speculated from the findings of Thai English teachers' applying both traditional and recent methods in the 23 teaching practice items at the high level that Thai English teachers might be in a transitional period of shifting from teacher-centered, textbook-directed, and grammar focused teaching methods to learner-centered, content-based, and integrated teaching methods, or they might have already followed an eclectic approach by considering using teaching practices they find effective in their teaching contexts. Further investigation is needed on this issue.

The other 21 teaching practice items that were perceived at the moderate level need further investigation, too. With the current ELT trends emphasizing an eclectic approach, Thai English teachers should be encouraged to use a wide range of teaching practices in the classroom in order to meet a wide range of their students' needs and interests and to move towards a concept of learner-centeredness and teacher creativity (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

First of all, as asserted by Kumaravedivelu (2012), nowadays English is not used as an instrument of spreading English native speakers' cultural beliefs and practices, but it is a tool of global communication and a carrier of global cultural flows; the teaching of multi-cultures and world issues and the use of a variety of accents in listening activities to help students communicate with people from other countries need to be implemented more by Thai English teachers. In the context of Thailand, "cultural awareness is an important skill for Thai learners to develop as an aid to effective international communication" (Baker, 2008, p. 141). ELT in Thailand, thus, needs to involve understanding of both Thai culture (Baker, 2008; Foley, 2005) and world cultures and world issues and a familiarity with a variety of accents.

The teaching of language learning strategies, which was perceived at the moderate level, also needs some attention as language learning strategies are essential in equipping learners with language skills to become independent and autonomous learners. As mentioned in Oxford (2003), "When the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning" (p. 2).

Moreover, Thai English teachers should be encouraged more to implement teaching practices that use task/project-based, literature/experience-based, corpora-based, music-based activities, and activities concerned with the analysis of different text types.

Last but not least, future studies are needed to further investigate why various designated teaching practices were perceived at the moderate level. It is possible that Thai English teachers might not have a good enough grounding in ELT methodology from their teacher education institutes, as mentioned in Prapaisit's (2003) study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore which ELT practices were perceived by student teachers in an ELT graduate program as being frequently used among Thai English teachers. The findings of this study highlight that ELT graduate programs need to design ELT methodology courses in ways that equip their student teachers with professional and practical knowledge covering the broad repertoire of different practices under various existing approaches and methods. Once teachers are trained to adapt different methods and approaches according to their local teaching contexts, they can later develop their own principled or personal approaches (Brown, 2002; Richards & Rodgers, 2014) to suit the aims of the lesson and their students; thus, they can implement suitable language learning practices for their students. As stated by Methitham (2014), "Teacher education programs must provide ELT teachers with a means to recognize themselves as more than just practitioners; to recognize themselves as intellectuals and scholars" (p. 33).

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Biography

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