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AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:
STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Learning environment factors have been increasingly taken into consideration within higher education in Thailand. Research has found that students' success in learning second language has formed by several factors within their learning context. This initial study aims to explore factors affecting learning environment of students studied toward Basic English I at the tertiary level. The instrument used in this investigation was a questionnaire. The study found that both internal and external factors affected second language acquisition of students. Components of effective learning environment included their desire to use English for specific purposes: education, travel, work, daily life, and hobby. In addition, factors such as teachers' characteristic, need to get good English grade, or need to further study are viewed as key components in promoting students' success in learning English as a second language.

1. Introduction

Learning environment is considered to be one of key factors promoting students' achievement. Generally, learning environment includes concrete environment (physical environment) such as building, classroom, or materials; and abstract environment (psychological environment) such as attitude or value (Prasitthirat, 1990; Sinthapanont, 2002). In addition to this learning environment, Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons (2002) assert academic environment as a part of learning environment that affects the overall academic success. They also indicate students' approaches to learning, academic performance, and learning strategies are critical to promote effective learning of students.

Learning environment has been widely discussed among scholars in the area of English as a second language. English as a second language (ESL) is being taught all over the world and the majority of ESL teachers are non-native speakers (Igawa, 2008). These emphasis the role of teachers who are required to maintain proficiency in English language and balance the

needs of diverse types of learners in order to provide first class instruction to their students while keeping up with a growing list of demands (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Peyton, 1997). Also the studies by Lizzio et al. (2002) as well as Vidaček-Hainš, Prats, and Appatova (2010) note that learning approaches and learning environment are key indicators that significantly affect students' second language acquisition. As a result of that, studying towards factors affecting learning environment must be given high priority.

English plays a crucial role in Thai higher education. It is also a working language of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which increases the demand of improving the quality of English Language Teaching in Thailand. However, the literature shows that Thai students often have a poor command of English. To be more specific, the data reveals that TOEFL scores of Thai students are among the lowest in Asian region (Educational Testing Services, 2009; Punthumasen, 2007). This situation requires urgent attention to improve the quality of teaching and learning in Thai education. This paper seeks to identify and make a practical contribution to the literature of which factors promoting students' success in learning English language.

The Context

The evidence discussed in this paper comes from work undertaken into the effective environment for second language acquisition in one Thai tertiary institution which is located in the southern part of Thailand. The participating university, at the time of the study, was classified as a comprehensive university. In Thailand, the Office of Higher Education Commission has classified universities in Thailand into four groups namely research universities, which are the most prestigious, followed by comprehensive universities, liberal arts universities, and finally community colleges. (OHEC, 2010). The participating university, as a comprehensive university, offered various degree programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

2. Method

2.1. Respondents

The respondent sample includes N= 320 undergraduate students (of whom 17.5% are male students and 82.5% are female students). The age of respondents is ranging between 17 to 21. Their areas of study vary such as teaching art, law, or science. These variations help the researcher gain better understanding of and ensure that data obtained represent the majority of students.

The collected data include demographic details of respondents, level of their English proficiency, attitude, and motivation toward English language. All the surveyed students were first and second year students. Among these are 170 first year students and 150 second year students. These students studied Basic English I subject in the first semester of 2014 academic year. At the time of the study, students are required to earn 9 credits from English subjects (3 credits per subject). Basic English I is a fundamental course that all students are required to study either in their first year or second year.

2.2 Tools and Measurements

In this investigation, questionnaire was used as the main investigating tool. The results have been obtained from Part 1 (Demographics), which contains 8 questions, and Part 2 (Components of Effective Learning Environment), which contains 15 questions. Questions in Part 1 relate to assessment of demographic data such as sex, year of study, level of English proficiency, etc. Each question in Part 2 evaluates a component of the effective learning environment. The data obtained from a questionnaire was analysed by using percentage, mean, standard deviation (S.D.)**.**

3. Results, Interpretation, and Conclusion

3.1 Level of Students' English Proficiency

For students' self-assessment of their English proficiency as according to IELTS band scale, the data showed that 126 students (39.4%) rated their English proficiency level at band 2 (No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs), followed by band 5 and band 4 at 27.8% and 19.7% respectively (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Level of English Proficiency

Band Scales	Numbers of students	%
1. Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.	3	0.9
2. No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs.	126	39.4
3. Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations.	25	7.8
4. Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in using complex language.	63	19.7
5. Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.	89	27.8
6. Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies,	7	2.2

inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.		
7. Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriateness and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.	2	0.6
8. Has full operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well.	3	0.9
9. Has full operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.	2	0.6

It is interesting to note that there are numbers of students indicated their level of proficiency at IELTS band 6-9. This data may against the previous literature which indicates that Thai students have very low level of English proficiency (Educational Testing Services, 2009). However, this may due to their misunderstanding of their English proficiency as students never take standard test like IELTS.

3.2 Students' Attitude Toward English Language and Students' Motivation in Learning English

The table 1.2 shows that the respondents viewed education (79.7%) and work (59.4%) as the most important reasons in learning English. It also illustrates that students indicated travel as important while they mentioned daily life (41.9%) and hobby (54.1%) as partly important factors in learning English (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2. Factors in Learning English Language

List	Most Important		Important		Partly Important		Less Important	
	Numbers of Students	%	Numbers of Students	%	Numbers of Students	%	Numbers of Students	%
1. Education	255	79.7	58	18.1	7	2.2	-	-
2. Work	190	59.4	98	30.6	31	9.7	1	0.3
3. Travel	115	35.9	130	40.6	73	22.8	2	0.6
4. Daily Life	57	17.8	110	34.4	134	41.9	19	5.9
5. Hobby	24	7.5	103	32.2	173	54.1	20	6.3

The table 1.3 below illustrates that the respondents indicate their need to communicate fluently as a key motivation in learning English (87.2%) followed by their need to use English for work (82.8%) and get good grade at 58.8%). On the other hand, the results show that students did not want to learn English in order to communicate with foreigners (58.4%).

Also they did not view English language as partly importance for their hobbies such as watching movie, listening to music, or reading (69.4%).

Table 1.3. Students' Motivation in Learning English

List	Motivated		Not motivated	
	Numbers of students	%	Numbers of students	%
1. To get good grade	188	58.8	132	41.3
2. To use English fluently	279	87.2	41	12.8
3. Teachers are great in teaching.	195	60.9	125	39.1
4. For own sake such as hobby or travel	98	30.6	222	69.4
5. To communicate with foreigners	133	41.6	187	58.4
6. For future work	265	82.8	55	17.2
7. For further education	235	73.4	85	26.6

From Table 1.2 and 1.3, it can be seen that students have positive attitude and motivation in learning English. Factors related to learning environment have promoted students' success in learning second language. These include internal and external factors. However, in this study, it was found that major factors affecting learning environment were internal factors. This may conclude that students viewed their individual or internal factors as the most important factors in their learning; the more positive they have, the more they can success in learning English as a second language. This supports the literature which notes that internal factors play a major role in promoting students' second language learning success (GLA, 2012). Also, external factor such as teachers is considered to be important in promoting second language learning. These findings further support the previous literature that teachers characteristics and skills are key factors in developing effective learning environment for students (Leu, 2004).

3.3. Comparing Students' Year of Study and Level of English Proficiency

The results reveal that the respondents' year of study significantly correlated with their self-rated level of English proficiency as shown in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4. Comparing Students' Year of Study and Level of English Proficiency

Year of Study	Level of English Proficiency	S.D.	Significant Levels
1st Student	3.89	1.456	.000
2nd Student	3.09	1.428	

The study found that students' perception toward their level of English proficiency correlated with the study year of students. First year students perceived their level of proficiency higher than second year students. This may explain that first year students have positive attitude toward learning English. They believed they were good at English and eager to use English which may be resulted from their frequent use of English when they studied high school. Learning second language requires great attention, not only from the learners themselves, but also learning environment. As English plays a major role in Thai universities, the need to increase the quality of English language education has been considered as important. However, Thai students have low command of English which limits their opportunity among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) where English is the working language.

Based on the current data, the results demonstrate how students' year of student result in different perceptions of their English proficiency. Considering the importance of the results, students need to motivate themselves and raise awareness in viewing all aspects as most important factors in learning English language as a second language. Importantly, they must maintain and advance their English proficiency to be able to use English fluently. At the same time, the university needs to encourage students in learning English, particularly providing skilful English teachers.

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