

Local Culture Preservation through Southern Thai-based English Lessons

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Introduction

The current established status of English as a global language has been triggered by the trend of globalization. Consequently, the majority of people around the world are enticed by this status because it means that communication across the globe is facilitated through the use of the English language. However, some people, in contrast, are feeling troubled or distressed by fear that their own native language is decreasing in popularity. In addition, a number of traits or characteristics associated with national identities which have been shaped by national history and passed down for generations are jeopardized. These concerns regarding the increasing influx of influence generated by, or related to, the English language through a multitude of channels have been exacerbated by the augmented popularity of social media that permeates most aspects of people's lives.

Along this line of argument, Thai culture and identity can possibly be vulnerable to subjugation. This study thus represents an attempt to ameliorate the situation, illustrating that the English language can be harnessed as a device to fulfil the obligations of developing Thai people's English competence and preserving Thai identity. As demonstrated by previous studies in diverse national and academic contexts (e.g. Kartini et al., 2019 in Indonesia for university students; Nambiar et al., 2018 in Malaysia for lower secondary students; Kanoksilapatham and Suranakkharin, 2018 in northern Thailand for elementary students), integrating local culture into English lessons can be potentially beneficial. Given the crucial role of elementary education as the grassroots of the entire educational paradigm, this study focuses on young Thai learners in southern Thailand. Because of the participants' young age, it is very likely that their exposure to the national culture of Thailand is somewhat limited. Therefore, to accommodate these young participants, Thai national culture or identity in this study is subcategorized as the cultural features or Thainess features pertaining specifically to southern Thailand.

Methodology

Objectives and instruments

The objectives of this paper are to determine whether southern Thai-based lessons could enhance the participant's local cultural knowledge and their English vocabulary knowledge associated with southern Thai knowledge. Contextualized in southern Thailand, this study employed a number of instruments including a questionnaire and two sets of grammar and vocabulary tests. First, a questionnaire was devised, distributed, and completed by local southern Thai residents in 14 provinces (100 copies in each province), asking them to identify the eight most popular tourist attractions in southern Thailand. Based on the most popular attractions nominated, eight corresponding English lessons were developed and expanded to cover the major points of the individual attractions. Based on these lessons, two sets of similar pre/post-tests of 40 items each were generated to examine the learners' southern Thai

knowledge and associated English vocabulary. The southern Thai knowledge test requires learners to minimally complete the statements in Thai, whereas the vocabulary test requires the learners to choose one of the four pictures presented that matched the word read twice by the researcher.

Participants

A public school in a rural area of southern Thailand was randomly selected to be the research site. The only requirement is the provision of a computer and a projector to display the instructional materials and corresponding tests conducted by the researcher. One Grade 4 classroom with 31 students of mixed English proficiency was selected by the Principal to participate in this 10-week long project. The students were between 10 to 11 years old, and consisted of 17 boys and 14 girls.

Procedure

In Week 1, the southern Thai and English vocabulary pre-tests were administered to estimate the learners' southern Thai and vocabulary knowledge prior to instruction. Subsequently, the lessons developed were implemented to the class described above for a period of 8 weeks (from Weeks 2 to 9, each week for two class periods of 50 minutes each). Finally, two similar sets of grammar and vocabulary post tests were administered in Week 10, the last week of the project. All test scores were analysed using descriptive statistics, followed by a t-test to estimate whether the knowledge gained, if any, is significant.

Results

This section presents two major findings regarding the young learners' knowledge of southern Thainess and associated vocabulary (Table 1).

Table 1. Southern Thainess and English Vocabulary Test Scores (n=31)

	Southern Thainess			English Vocabulary		
	Pretest	Posttest	Gain Score	Pretest	Posttest	Gain Score
Min	3	12	5	10	15	2
Max	19	38	30	25	40	22
Mean	8.24	24.72	16.65	16.60	29.76	13.10
$t = -12.37, p < 0.05$			$t = -8.530, p < 0.05$			

As shown in Table 1, of 31 Grade 4 students, the average southern Thai knowledge pre-test score was 8.24, and it rose to 24.72 after instruction. The t-test analysis reveals that this increase is statistically significant. As for English vocabulary knowledge, the learners had an average score of 16.60 and 29.76, before and after instruction, respectively. Similar to the southern Thai gain score, the vocabulary gain score increased significantly.

Discussion

This section highlights two major findings of the increased knowledge of southern Thainess and associated vocabulary knowledge. The findings are congruent with other scholars (Kartini et al., 2019; Nambiar et al., 2018), confirming the positive role of local culture manifested in

English lessons based on the southern Thai context. The findings also demonstrate that local culture-based English lessons can contribute not only to the preservation and fostering of local culture in young learners, but also the expansion of their English vocabulary repertoire. One of the reasons contributing to the positive findings include the fact that the content of the English lessons is relevant to the learners' life and experience. Therefore, once their southern Thainess was activated by the lessons, they were able to connect with the lessons presented, facilitating the acquisition of southern Thainess. By extension, it is hoped that their motivation to learn English might have been boosted during the instruction, because they could realize the intrinsic value of learning English as a device to express their southern Thai identity in English with a certain level of confidence.

In this study, the young students were given an opportunity to demonstrate their vocabulary knowledge, scaffolded by a set of four pictures for each word heard. The nature of the task was deemed encouraging for these young learners as it did not require them to produce linguistic output. Additionally, the words taught and tested were associated with the lesson content. Thus, learning new vocabulary items had a purpose, reinforcing or sharpening their identity and allowing them to express their identity in English. These findings corroborate the schema theory which is known to exert a positive impact on language learning.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that English lessons relevant to the students' experience, as developed in this study, yield a positive outcome – particularly in the area of cultural awareness and English vocabulary. However, it remains to be investigated whether these learners can subsequently transfer their vocabulary and southern Thai knowledge in performing language tasks such as speaking or writing. It would be interesting to observe the positive impact of local culture-based lessons in executing integrated language tasks such as a tour guide simulated task, which requires both knowledge and vocabulary. Pedagogically, this study provides guidelines to English educationists with regard to how to construct appropriate and satisfactory material for young Thai learners of English. From the learners' perspective, the local culture-based English lessons provide the impetus, motivation, and a justified reason to learn English to express their identity. In short, English lessons have become realistic and meaningful.

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