Let them recount their stories: Exploring the lived experiences of learning English in the Thai EFL context.

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated factors influencing English as a foreign language (EFL) learning in a Thai university. Participants (n = 23), constituting an intact group, were Thai university students enrolled in a remedial course of English reading skills development at a local university. Based on the data collected from their retrospective accounts and focused group interviews, four salient themes emerged that informed current teaching beliefs and methods. They were 1) attitudes toward English; 2) teaching performances; 3) English a difficult language; and 4) motivation. While these findings may not necessarily be "new" knowledge, they nevertheless underscore the importance of both internal and external factors that come into play in the Thai EFL context.

Key words: Thai EFL; attitude; teaching performances; difficult language; motivation

1. Introduction

This exploratory study had its impetus from my own experience of teaching English for academic purposes classes at my university, especially classes that are designed for the so-called less able students such as the one I will be discussing in this study. From my observations over the years, most of the students come unequipped as far as basic elements of English are concerned—be they vocabulary, sentence structures or beyond. Certainly, this is a cause for concern. After all, the second language acquisition and learning enterprise has a lofty goal of assisting L2 teacher and learners to successfully grapple with many a constraint that impede L2 learning and teaching .

2. Study Context

The university in which students who served as participants in this study enrolled is a small government-sponsored graduate college offering master and doctoral degree programs in the social sciences such as public administration, social development and applied statistics. Its official name is the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), located in the suburbs of Bangkok, Thailand. Students who are not exempted from taking the English courses are required to enroll in an English foundation course titled "LC 4001: Reading Skills Development in English for Graduate Studies," and those who fail the course will be further required to enroll in a remedial course titled, "LC 4011: Remedial Reading Skills Development in English for Graduate Studies". This group of students, comprising between 150 and 200 each academic year, are arguably the most suitable examples of Thai EFL learners who are known to "struggle" considerably in their attempt to learn English. While considerable research has been conducted examining learning strategies as employed by the so-called "good language learners," (e.g., Rubin, 1975; Norton and Toohey, 2001; Takeuchi, 2003; Ding, 2007; Wong and Nunan, 2011), relatively few studies have been devoted to their counterparts, the so-called "less able language learners." As a result, I want to explore how these learners come to reflect on their English learning experiences in the Thai EFL context. More specifically, this small-scale qualitative study will ascertain factors impinging on the learners' development of attitudes towards English learning, the roles of curriculum, teachers and parents as well as their own learning episodes.

Research Question 1: What are salient patterns of the participants' reflections on their experiences of learning English in the Thai EFL context?

Research Question 2: To what extent do the participants' reflections inform current SLA theories and practices?

3. Focused Literature Review

Pertinent SLA Theories and Hypotheses

Resorting to the computer metaphor, the input-interaction-output model suggests that second language acquisition is a matter of receiving input or good language quality on the one hand and having the opportunity to meaningfully produce something in the target language on the other hand. What transpires in between is interaction that is engaged in by second language (L2 learners). The advocates of this model state that learning an L2 boils down

to the opportunity to receive (i.e., to hear and to read) good quality language and to produce (i.e., to say and to write) forms in the L2. If the model is followed strictly, success in an L2 is guaranteed. (see Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985; Long, 2007). While the model seems to provide some insights into the way an L2 is acquired, L2 learners are not machines simply waiting for input and producing output at a touch of the screen. L2 learners have their own "agenda"—linguistic, psycholinguistic, socio-cultural, to name a few.

Given the missing link between the "input" and "output," Long (2007) indicated that what is needed is the opportunity for L2 learners to have meaningful interaction using target language forms. Long further argued that when given sufficient opportunity to interact through the language, L2 learners will be able to help one another figure out right forms and meanings of linguistic items in the L2. Although some might argue that interaction of equally linguistically poor L2 learners will eventually amount to the "blind leading the blind," research suggests otherwise that they could instead help each other learn (McDonough, 2004). The fact that interaction has a great potential to develop L2 learners' communicative competence is further elaborated through a more human SLA theory, sociocultural theory.

According to Lantolf and Thorne (2007), the major tenet of sociocultural theory is that all kinds of learning are first social and then individual and L2 learning is no exception. More specifically, any L2 instructional context that allows for sufficient interaction in the L2, coupled with initial guidance or assistance from the native speaker or the teacher, will enable L2 learners to move up the proficiency ladder, thus becoming more linguistically mature. One of the key educational mechanisms involved in sociocultural theory is the notion of "scaffolding." Through meaningful interaction, L2 learners should also be guided by a more proficient learner, teacher or native speaker so that they will be able to eventually rely on themselves in learning. The essence of scaffolding is further endorsed by the concept of "zone of proximal development." That is to say, the classroom teacher should provide a platform where incremental development can be fostered. Once L2 learners are in this "comfort zone," they will fly, so to speak.

In conclusion, the sociocultural theory serves to extend, if not replace, the input-interaction-output model of SLA, so that L2 learners can be cast in a proper light, being seen as real human beings, not machines processing linguistic data.

In addition to the computer metaphor of input and output constructs, another major SLA theory is concerned with the issue of individual differences (Cook, 2008 and Ortega, 2009). Individual differences deal with language aptitude and motivation. It has been advanced that those who have high language aptitude, the so-called "born to learn language" are believed to acquire any L2 effortlessly and go on to achieve native-like proficiency. While this assertion appeals to our commonsense knowledge and personal experience—sometimes we run into these linguistic savants who appear to understand and use the language with ease, this should not be interpreted as the only factor that matters the most. For most EFL situations like in Thailand, students usually have instrumental motivation because they want to make use of the English knowledge for their advanced study or future careers, although it may be the case that an L2 learner may begin with instrumental motivation only to develop another kind of motivation—intrinsic motivation—if and when he/she has become very successful in the L2; language is not just a means to an end but, more importantly, is pursued because of genuine interest in it. When it comes to whether or which kind of motivation is more influential, individuals differ in this regard.

Selected Prior Studies on Thai EFL students

The past two decades have witnessed a plethora of studies on Thai EFL students that suggest that ample room of improvement and better understanding has been left voided and wait to be filled. (See, for example, Baker and Boonkit, 2004; McDonough, 2004; Koul et al., 2009; Watson-Todd and Pojanapunya, 2009).

Baker and Boonkit (2004) examined learning strategies in reading and writing in the EAP contexts. Participants in their study were drawn from a local Thai university. Data were collected through questionnaires and diaries, which suggested that their participants made … "frequent use of metacognitive, cognitive and compensation strategies…" (p. 319) in their EAP classes. While the Baker and Boonkit study touched on learning strategies, McDonough (2004) focused on learner-learner interaction involving some pair and group activities. Her participants came from a local Thai university in the North. The study, which explored perceptions of both teachers and students, and investigated the correlation between the amount of participation and language proficiency, indicated that "…learners who had more participation during the pair and small group activities demonstrated improved production of the target forms…" (p. 207).

Anchored in the search for the role of language anxiety, Koul et al. (2009) examined Thai college students' motivational goals for learning English as well as language anxiety. Some of the major results reported are that

"[f]emales were significantly more "academic" oriented, more instrumental and less socio-cultural than males toward English language learning" (p. 676).

The aforementioned studies have focused on Thai EFL students in many aspects; however, what appears to be missing is research into "less able" students who are in the majority of Thai EFL students, a somewhat more realistic group of L2 learners to delve into through research. Common sense and teaching experience appear to inform any classroom teachers that the "less able" students simply do not have what it takes to become successful L2 learners, that they are plain lazy, that they are losers because of previous poor teaching performances, and that they are unmotivated to learn. However familiar these complaints are, research should be conducted to ascertain thought patterns and beliefs that this group of L2 learners holds. Findings to be reported should shed light on this "forgotten" are of second language learning in the Thai EFL context.

4. Research Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 23 students (13 male; 10 female) enrolled in LC 4011: Remedial Reading Skills Development in English for Graduate Studies, semester 2, academic year 2011. These students constituted an intact group because of their common level of English proficiency. They had been placed in this course because they had received a failing grade (ranging from B- to D) in their previous course, LC 4001: Reading Skills Development in English for Graduate Studies.

Data Collection

First, the participants were asked to write an essay in Thai reflecting on their English language learning experiences in their prior schooling, a qualitative data collection technique called, "retrospective recall." According to Groom and Littlemore (2011), this technique "… does have an advantage in that it does not interfere with the activity itself at the time. It can, therefore, play a crucial role in a research study" (p. 66). This reflective paper allowed them to think on paper about what appears to have been effective and ineffective in their learning endeavors. Second, a focus group interview was conducted with the whole class. Sommer and Sommer (2002) point out that "[f]ocus groups can produce stimulating discussions that reveal perceptions and concerns that might go undetected in a survey" (p. 132).

Based on the initial findings from the retrospective recall task and focus group interview, I discerned patterns as found in the recall, coming up with major themes that capture the participants' lived experiences of learning English. Moreover, because I was teaching the course at the time of data collection, I had the opportunity to observe their learning behaviors and question-answer response patterns. I jotted down my observations after each teaching period. In this regard, my own observation helped to inform the data generated by the participants.

Data Analysis

I conducted open coding whereby the data collected were classified by their units of meaning "…in order to attach annotations and concept to them" (Flick, 2002, p. 178). Second, based on the results of the open coding, data were further refined through axial coding whereby subcategories were related to a category through comparisons of the categories, leading to the emergence of salient themes. This was be summarized through selective coding where salient themes were discussed.

5. Findings

Based on the completed narratives, five salient findings emerged. They are: 1) attitudes toward English; 2) teaching performances; 3) English a difficult language; and 4) motivation. I will discuss each of these findings below. The patterns of discussion will be presented through short sentence excerpts for commonly found cases, to be substantiated by "extreme" examples (if any) of each of the four aspects mentioned above. These "extreme" substantiations are provided as vignettes

Attitudes toward English

The majority of the participants thought of English as difficult or very difficult subject. Although their English learning experiences were found to incorporate certain fun elements such as singing English songs in class, their attitudes toward English and the learning of it was somewhat negative. Those difficult aspects of English had to do with the grammar and vocabulary. For example, the participants believed that "…English is definitely difficult, especially its grammar" (S1), "what I fear most about English is its vocabulary" (S2), "…even after I graduated from grade 12, I didn't have any clues about English grammar and vocabulary, which led to my dislike of English…"(S16). Another participant suggested that most problems in learning English lie with him, saying that "…because I'm terribly lazy. I don't like reading, let alone reading in English, so I couldn't really enjoy the English classes" (S21).

As much as grammar and vocabulary seemed to pose a real challenge for most of the participants, a few expressed content in their learning experiences. For example, "my first impression with the English lesson was that it was something new and interesting" (S19). Another participant said, "I can recall that I enjoyed learning English. I felt very happy in class" (S12). One particular participant cultivated good attitude toward English because of his religion. As he put it, "because I'm Christian, I became interested in English" (S8).

The wide range of reasons discussed above underscores the importance of learner attitude toward learning outcomes, although some of those reasons appeared to be somewhat extreme. While some of the attitude cultivated by the participants may appear to be internally driven, it is to be noted that whether or not the attitude upheld by such participants is also influenced by external factors such as teaching performances, a topic I discuss below.

Teaching performances.

As far as teaching performances are concerned, the participants provided varied responses concerning the teaching performances of their English teachers. Some found that their teachers were dedicated and kind enough to sustain their interest in the subject. Others found their English learning experiences marred by undesirable teaching performances. For example, participant 6 realized that the activities provided by her English teacher helped make the lessons fun. As she put it, " I think the activities the teacher assigned were useful, including the vocabularies taught." (S6). Or as participant 9 put it that, "…although I didn't like English at all when I first started learning it, I had a great English teacher when I was in grade 7. She actually changed my attitude toward English because she didn't want us to remember things but rather encouraged us to speak English…" (S09).   Another participant pointed out that "the English teacher my friends and I called "Kru Maam" made English fun to study. What she did was to have us memorize lists of words, 3 words a day. She had a great sense of humor…very funny. Everyone of us loved her very much" (S17). Participant 14 pointed out that "my English teacher taught well, the contents were fun to read, especially when the teacher translated them into Thai…I was always waiting to know the end of the stories we were reading." (S14). However, counter examples depicting a less rosy picture are found in the narratives of the following participants. For example, participant 23 said, "when I began my English lessons at grade 5, I didn't like the subject at all. The teacher was very unkind to students. In fact, she was very mean, making my friends and me depressed having to study with her…" (S23). While most of the participants had Thai teachers as English teachers, participant 4 had a Philippine teacher whom he found hard to understand. As he put it, "my school hired a Philippine teacher to teach us English. His accent was difficult to understand, which discouraged me from trying to learn and understand English" (S4).

It should be noted here that the participants did not provide any extreme cases of English teaching performances, although most pointed out that the teaching performances of their teachers were average to excellent. Additionally, many participants said that the most important reason why they didn't do well in English is that they didn't put enough efforts into it. They were too lazy. They were not motivated to do any better.

English a difficult language.

The aforementioned opinions about teaching performances mean, among other things, that teachers and their teaching performances could exert considerable influence on student learning. However, teaching performances are only partly to blame for failure of proper learning on the part of certain students. An additional factor that greatly shaped their attitudes toward English is the inherent difficulty of English grammar and vocabulary; in other words, many participants reflected that they did not put great efforts in learning because they felt that English is a very difficult language to understand. Indeed, for many of them, English was merely a boring school subject quite detached from their day-to-day realities. For example, a participant said, "…English is what I never like and very difficult…" (S21). Another said, "even though I had to attend extra cram school, I couldn't really figure out how English worked" (S1). Another participant pointed out that "English vocabulary was difficult to remember. On top of that, its sentence structure was always beyond me" (S16). "Although I realized that English was important, I found it really hard to use all the English tenses correctly" (S11). "My English class focused on grammar, which eluded me…I simply had to jot down everything on board without understanding" (S23).

The next section will discuss the role of motivation (or lack thereof) in learning English.

Motivation.

Motivation appears to have been the most frequently mentioned factor in the participants' reflections. They suggest that motivation is both internally and externally driven. For example, a participant explicitly mentioned that "I learned English just enough to get by, to pass the university entrance exam, so that my parents would be proud of

me" (S2). Or as another participant put it, "I always felt terribly bad when it comes to learning English. Since grade 1, I had never had any understanding of the language. My homework was always marked in red ink, indicating that my answers were all wrong" (S5). Another participant said, "To me, English is very difficult. I usually sat quietly, feeling ashamed to ask any questions because I thought my friends would consider any questions I should have asked silly" (S1). As mentioned above, while some participants found English learning experiences unpleasant, others seemed to have had a blasé attitude toward the experience.

What should be of interest here is that the lack of motivation on the part of some participants has to do with the fact that there was no opportunity to use English. For instance, a participant said, "because I didn't get to use English, what I had learned was useless then. On top of that, I was kind of lazy, too" (S3). Or as another participant put it, "Come to think of it, the reason I was so poor in English is because I didn't pay attention and I had limited vocabulary" (S7). Another participant pointed out different experiences he had learning English with Thai teachers and English native-speaking teachers. He said, "when I was in high school, I had both Thai teacher of English and native speaker teach me. The Thai teacher taught grammar, and the native speaker taught conversations. I found the latter more fun and interesting because of various activities he provided" (S23).

The analysis of data from the focus group interviews, for the most part, substantiated the findings as reported in the narratives. I will discuss the findings of the focus group interviews next.

Focus group interviews

The participants were asked questions that focused on the policy and day-to-day teaching performances as well as their ideas about how English should be taught. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to ascertain the extent to which the participants self-reflected their own ideas about the English learning enterprise in the Thai EFL situation. Based on the results reported below, the focus group interviews allow for many strands of English learning experiences to come together.

Of the ten questions asked, the one that grabbed the participants' attention the most focused on major problems they had encountered in learning English. Like the ideas expressed in the narratives, most participants realized that becoming proficient in English is an uphill task, one that is beyond any control. The ordeal that they had to grapple with has much to do with the fact that they did not have ample opportunity to use the language on a daily basis. Further, the lack of opportunity to use the language led to less motivation on the part of many participants.

Although most of them found English far removed from their daily experiences, they believed that learning English grammar was important, albeit boring. When asked if they could make any changes in English education in Thailand, most of them agreed that the way English is taught should be improved. For example, the goal of learning English should be to communicate successfully, even though they may speak with the non-native accent. This is in congruence with the changing trend in English as an international language. According to Jenkins (1998), "the acquisition of a native-like accent is no longer the ultimate objective of the majority of learners... (p. 119). In line with the acceptability of the non-native accent is that the teacher does not have to be a native speaker only. The participants did not necessarily find English native-speaking teachers superior to their Thai counterparts, although one particular participant (S23) found that his non-Thai teacher of English made use of fun activities. However, several participants concurred that English native-speaking teachers may be more appropriate for advanced groups of learners because these students will be ready to understand the teachers better than the less able groups. So, it is not the case that it is always better to have either a Thai or a non-Thai teacher; rather, the point is it depends on several factors, not least of which is the students' English proficiency.

When probed further whether the participants found the emphasis on sentence structure in a reading course useful, the participants thought that the focus on sentence structure was of necessity because they had to deal with academic English (which implies that sentences tend to be more complicated than everyday English). Yet, they also found that the learning of sentence structure was tedious. This is understandable because when the teaching of English is language-centered, those who are not language majors may not necessarily appreciate the experience as desirable, especially when dealing with less able students—so dubbed because of their inability or lack of motivation to explore the intricacies of grammar—inability in the sense that they may not have the kind of language aptitude to acquire those grammar points.

The participants' reflections on low English proficiency among Thai students in general suggested that the root cause was that English is not an official language, like in Singapore, which means a dearth of real English usage—whether at home or at work. Pressed further to elaborate on the official status of English in Thailand, they did not come forward. This is understandable because they may not have had enough knowledge and understanding

about language policy. The thought of English as an official language was conjured up, following the Singapore English model, not necessarily related to language history of a country.

The last question in the interview was concerned with the participants' suggestions regarding the teaching of English in their course (LC 4011) that I briefly described earlier. Some of the responses were, for example, the class should be smaller, so that they would dare to ask questions that others might have considered "silly." In addition, students in the class should have come from the same major so that they would focus on any one particular field e.g., public administration. This suggestion seems to underscore their needs to read English relevant to their fields rather than general English. This has to more to do with classroom management than whether grammar should be emphasized. Some participants said that they did not want to be called on to speak English in class, nor did they want to volunteer answers. They reasoned that they did not want to be embarrassed among "strangers"—the other students from other majors rather than theirs.

On the whole, the focus group interviews highlighted several key aspects of the participants' English learning experiences, ranging from no real opportunity to use English to the inherent difficulty of English grammar and vocabulary, and classroom management. These experiences are not uncommon, given the fact that the participants could be considered "representatives" of the average Thai students with no solid background knowledge of English.

6. Discussion

The two main research questions posed in this study focused on the patterns of responses given by the participants as regards their English learning experiences, particularly their lived experiences and on the extent to which those reflections inform existing SLA theories. I will attempt to answer these two questions below.

As far as their patterns of thoughts are concerned, many strands of their English learning experiences appear to have come together. They are lack of real opportunity to use the language, insufficient motivation, the built-in linguistic difficulty of English, varying teaching performances, and peer pressure. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to try to sequence these strands as to which should come first. For the bottom line is that they are closely intertwined.

It should be noted that the answers to research question one as discussed above lend support to existing SLA theories and previous studies. For example, lack of opportunity to use real English in class suggests that, for this group of learners, their English class was devoid of perhaps comprehensible input and output (Long, 2007; McDonough, 2004). However, if comprehensible input is operationalized as "extensive reading (ER)" (Brown and Larson-Hall, 2012), then it could be argued that it may not have been the lack of input per se.

As far as motivation or lack thereof is concerned, the participants' low level of motivation appears to have been influenced by some external and internal factors, such as the English-deprived environment or poor teaching styles. In this regard, it can be said that "motivation may…be situated" (Brown and Larson-Hall, 2012, p. 134). In other words, because all the participants have learned English in order to make use of it for their future study or careers, they appear to have instrumental motivation. Instrumental motivation may not last long, especially when the goal is fulfilled; perseverance may subside, and this is detrimental to second language learning in most cases. What these participants should be able to cultivate for themselves is self-efficacy. According to Zimmerman (2000), "[s]elf efficacy beliefs have also been shown convergent validity in influencing such key indices of academic motivation as choice of activities, level of effort, persistence, and emotional reactions" (p. 86).

Concerning poor teaching performances, the participants' stories about their bad impression of their English teachers underscore the important role of teachers in helping students to learn. The participants argued for more flexible teaching that caters to their diverse needs in learning English.

It appears that effective classroom management deserves serious consideration for less able students. The participants' concern over peer pressure, impending embarrassment as a result of asking "simple" questions has much to do with classroom management, especially group dynamics (Dornyei and Malderez, 1997 as cited in Chang, 2010). Group dynamics, which incorporates group cohesiveness and group processes, should be a topic with which teachers should become familiar. According to Chang (2010), "…a highly cohesive group having positive norms could be a stimulus to one's learning" (p.132). Although the participants' English proficiency seemed cohesive in the sense that they belonged to the less able group, this kind of cohesiveness did not appear to help them improve their English. Their LC 4011 class seemed to be a hindrance to their major concern over their main courses in their respective areas of study. In this sense, effort should be put in figuring out how to help this group of learners become more motivated and make the class more engaging.

Research on Humanities and Social Sciences   www.iiste.org
ISSN 2222-1719 (Paper) ISSN 2222-2863 (Online)
Vol 2, No.9, 2012

IISTE

In an attempt to answer main research question two concerning the extent to which the participants' stories have come to inform current SLA theories, some of those narratives appear to touch on the theories as will be discussed below.

For one thing, the input-interaction-output model of SLA turned out to be sufficient but not holistic enough to capture the lived experiences of the participants as revealed through their stories. As can be anticipated, they need input. They need interaction. They need opportunity to use the language (to output). But those needs must be construed differently from those found in the average EFL class. That is, the input given to them must be carefully tailored to truly help them learn. I would suggest that the foremost function of input is not to give them linguistic elements to remember but to foster positive attitude toward English, to build up their confidence that English lies within their capability. They need interaction, one that does not belittle them but incrementally enables them to become linguistically strong. Interestingly enough, the kind of interaction they preferred was interaction with the teacher, not necessarily with fellow classmates. This observation needs to be further studied because it appears to run counter to what McDonough (2004) asserted that more interaction among students leads to more learning.

7. *Conclusion*

This exploratory study was conducted to ascertain the lived experiences of less able students of English at a public university in Thailand. Stories they had told and interviews given all point to the fact that, like EFL anywhere else, English education in Thailand has been a real challenge. Existing theories in second language acquisition certainly have tried to explain various groups of second language (L2) learners. Of particular interest is the less able group of L2 learners. Practicing teachers, unlike theorists, have the urge to come up with quick-fix solutions to their day-to-day teaching problems. However, as revealed in this paper, stories that are told by the so-called less able students could be revealing and thus put classroom concerns at the center stage. Theories, SLA or educational in general, must be carefully selected and it seems that every strand of those theories must be situated. Sweeping generalizations based on those theories do not deliver results we all want. What I have learned from my less able students, making up the participants in this study, only serve to reaffirm my strong belief that teaching English means teaching not only the language but paying attention to individual learners. Theories are there for a wise selection but must not override any decisions to be made by the teacher about what is best for their students. My participant's lived experiences as discussed above do not confine themselves to my students only; they seem to represent most, if not all, cases of less able students in the EFL classroom anywhere.

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