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EFL Learners and Their Success in Learning English in the Thai Context

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Abstract

The main aim of the study is to explore 15 high achieving English language learners' accounts of their undertakings in learning English in a Thai upper secondary school. The researcher adopts the view of social learning, particularly in reaching better understandings of the learners' experiences in learning English. As there exists a tendency to gauge learners' success in English based on examinations, this study asserts that language learning involves more than a cognitive process, thus values the social aspects of experiential English learning. The focus lies on investigating the perceptions of these high achieving English language learners of their success in learning English as well as the influences contributing to it. Two methods are used to collect data: focus groups and interviews. The findings indicate the participants' perceptions of their own success in learning English in three main aspects: English language ability, examination performance and skills in teaching others. In particular, the ability to speak English fluently and correctly appears to be of utmost importance for a successful English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner. It is also found that most learners identify their own performance in class, the teacher, including teacher rapport, and school culture as contributing to their English learning achievement. In focusing on the learners' perceptions and their actual experiences, insights into how the learners actually undergo the learning opportunities provided by the education system can be obtained. To understand the extent to which innovations in English language teaching and learning have been successful, the everyday realities of the language classroom and school have to be accentuated.

Keywords: EFL learners, English learning, learning context, learning experiences

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Introduction

Intending to understand the learners' experiences of learning in view of their English achievement as measured through a formal assessment, the researcher wanted to find out why some high achieving Thai English language learners have been more successful in learning English. By acknowledging the learners as whole persons and social beings, some historical and cultural background on the learners' experiences with English would be explored. This provides a basis for understanding the identity of these learners, how they see their progress in English, how they see themselves as learners of English and their responses to English teaching and learning situations. Their reasons for learning English, their constructions of themselves as learners of English and their perceptions of learning English as a subject in school would also be examined.

The researcher was interested in the experiences of learners who had been successful in terms of examinations. What other people thought these learners had accomplished in English based on formal learning indicates that examination results had been simplistically regarded as an indicator of success.

There is a strong inclination in Thailand to measure learners' progress in English solely in connection with examinations, reflecting a mainstream second language acquisition view that language learning is a cognitive process, and that it involves a process-product approach where attainment in the latter is simply measurable. The researcher started this study with an assumption that these learners, based on their excellent results in the English examinations, were successful English language learners. However, the researcher also took the stance that language learning involved more than a cognitive undertaking, thus deciding to explore the social aspects of the learners' experiences of learning English which could account for their success in English as well.

Two main research questions in the study are:

1. What are the perceptions of high achieving English language learners of their own success in learning English?
2. What are the influences that the learners identify as contributing to their success as EFL learners?

Literature Review

With the view of social learning, language learning is a relationship between social and cognitive processes, which involve a social and collaborative endeavor and transformation of learners' identities and participation in the context of learning where language has its own distinctive role in the learning of a language (Breen, 2001).

Language learning also depends on linguistic input. This is because theorists such as Krashen (1982) believes linguistic input is the main source for language learning. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, to acquire language one needs to be exposed to comprehensible linguistic input. If the input contains forms and structures just beyond the learner's current level of competence both comprehension and acquisition of the language can occur (Lightbown, 2000).

Interactionist theorists similarly agree that input is the key source of language learning. This suggests that as the learner tries to manage his or her interactions with second language input

and then organizes his or her second language output internally and invisibly (Lightbown, 2000), based on Swain's (1985) output hypothesis, language learning can advance.

The implication of such a position is that the language classroom is seen as of value as a linguistic data provider to shape learners for efficient mental processing of the language (Breen, 2001). This seems to reflect the common belief in Thailand that the classroom is the most important context for learning English.

From the viewpoint of theorists and researchers working within the information-processing model of human learning and performance (McLaughlin, 1987; Johnson, 1996) language learning is perceived as the accumulation of knowledge systems such as grammatical structures through 'practice' and integration of the learning task that results in a fluent performance.

From this assumption it is through practice that learners will be able to store various aspects of the language learned, and that when the learner wants to perform an action, the stored knowledge can be retrieved from memory (Johnson, 2001). This implies the notion of transmission learning which involves the one-way flow of information from the teacher to the learners. More crucially, the idea that the learners have accumulated knowledge of the language from the teacher is something readily explored. This probably explains the reason why in Thailand learners' progress in English is mainly evaluated through examinations.

However, as stated earlier language learning can be perceived as social and collaborative phenomena embedded in social activities in which people engage in various everyday situations and settings. In the second language learning situation, the teacher becomes a co-participant, a source of constant affirmation, to develop learners' sensitivity to learning through direct exposure to stimuli and to develop in the learners' cognitive prerequisites for such direct learning (Kozulin, 1998).

This collaborative social interaction is viewed to be most productive within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD is understood as the distance between the learner's actual development and the learner's potential growth (Wertsch, 1984). In second language learning, this zone can be interpreted as the distance between learners' basic knowledge in the language and the extent to which the learner can advance to a higher level of proficiency in the language. It is believed that within this ZPD that effective learning takes place with the help of or in collaboration with the others who serve as mediators.

Within this zone, a teacher can also develop strategies to assist learners. The support provided by the teacher is known as scaffolding (van Lier, 2001). In the initial stages of learning, learners are supported more directly in their learning, for example, through explicit instruction. However, as learners show a sign of being capable of dealing with the learning task on their own, the scaffold must be gradually dismantled.

From this perspective, in the formal teaching and learning situation, the learners' development and learning seem to be shaped by their relationship with the teacher. Based on this view, it is therefore important to recognize that learners' achievement or success in formal second

language learning, is partly under their own control, and partly under the control of their teachers (Mercer, 2001). The language learners, therefore, arguably are not solely responsible for their own achievement.

By developing the notion of learning as a social and collaborative activity, it is important to note that within the social framework, language is considered the most important tool for such activity. We need language both first language (L1) and second language (L2) to mediate and regulate our relationships with others, and with ourselves as in organizing our thoughts for reasoning, planning and reviewing, and hence change the nature of the relationship (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). In other words, this means that we do not use language just for communication where communication among other things involves sharing our culture but also we use it for thinking and in turn, understanding (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Mercer (2000) asserts that language, in fact, helps people to think together, and thus, introduces the notion of interthinking. According to Mercer, when people interact through language, they are in actual fact combining their mental resources. Through observation, imitation and taking part in joint physical activity by means of language, people can jointly create new ideas and evaluate the quality of their achievement.

Methodology

This study adopts a case study approach. It fits the needs to explore the situation under study where data are from people's experiences and perceptions and so are considered realistic and rich. Case studies are a data source from which further investigation can be made which can lead to further research. It is therefore important to realize specific cases and ensure a more holistic approach to research (Cohen et al., 2000).

Sampling

The participants consisted of 15 Thai high school students who were studying in grades 10, 11 and 12 in a Thai school in suburban Bangkok. From the total, five students from different classes in each of the grade levels were selected. They studied in a Thai program and English was learned about three hours per week in a 15-week semester. Ten of them were female while the 5 others were male. The participants were purposively chosen based on their English grades in which case they must have received at least 85% (A grades) from English courses for as minimum the past two semesters consecutively. None had experienced studying overseas.

Data collection

To obtain data for this study, two methods were used: focus groups and interviews, all carried out in Thai, fully transcribed, and then translated into English. A focus group is as a group discussion on a particular topic organized for research purposes. This discussion is guided, monitored and recorded by a researcher (Silverman, 2000). This method was used in this study because the researcher found that the participants once asked to take part in this study were generally eager to express ideas and account for their experiences in learning English. Thus, it was decided that stranger groups would be used as the participants would be able to speak freely without fear of repercussion, and challenges to other participants could be more challenging and probing, leading to richer data. Three focus groups for which each level represents were deployed.

The researcher was, however, conscious that being in a group could also mean that learners were unwilling to assert their views because of a fear of being intimidated by their peers, the interviewer or even the situation (Powney & Watts, 1987). Similarly, being in a friendship group could also pose some problems, as learners' views may tend to converge in order to keep the peace. In the light of these foreseen drawbacks, during the group discussions, the researcher tried to encourage all the participants to talk and to monitor these individuals who could have dominated the conversations (Creswell, 1998).

Interviews were another principal method of data collection for the reason that findings created through the interaction of the inquirer and the phenomenon (the individuals) are often more plausible (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). In addition, Fontana and Frey (1994) state that interviewing is most powerful in trying to understand people. Cooper and McIntyre (1996) suggest that, in gaining access to learners' perspectives, what is needed is an approach that enables the participants to express their own personal views or constructions of their experience.

A semi-structured interview technique was used in order to give the participants 'a voice' with a certain degree of freedom to talk about what was centrally significant to them within the designed framework of this research study (Bell, 1993). At the same time, using a semi-structured interview enabled the researcher to probe and ask for clarification as the participants constructed their meaning in response to the questions raised about their experiences in order to construct an understanding of their accounts and perceptions of learning English.

Data analysis

The data was initially transcribed. The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim during the first phase. These transcripts were then returned to the groups for respondent validation (Radnor, 2002). Similarly, the individual interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants for respondent validation.

In the first instance, adapting the analysis procedures advocated by Knodel (1993) for focus group data, the researcher used the discussion guideline as a point of reference in coding the data. These coded data were then transferred to an overview grid that provided a descriptive summary of the content of the focus group discussions. This overview grid served as a guide for further coding. The transcripts were read and re-read taking into account the group as well as the individual responses. As emphasized by Morgan (1993), discussions in focus group depend on both the individuals that make up the group and the dynamic of the group as a whole.

The coding process was undertaken based on emerging units of meaning (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Throughout this process, the data was constantly compared across groups and across individuals in the group. At this point, descriptive accounts were written out based on the categories to indicate relationships and patterns. The next step was then to integrate the data to yield an understanding of the participants' constructions of English learning experiences.

Similar procedures were used for the individual interviews. However, the constant comparative method was based on comparing across individuals within the same level and in different levels based on similar units of meanings. Similar units of meaning were identified and

coded. These were then matched to the data from the focus group discussions to understand the overall learners' perceptions of their success in learning English and the influences that they identify as contributing to their learning success.

Findings and Discussion

To answer the first research question, three major domains can be addressed: English language ability, examination performance and teaching a skill.

In terms of English language ability, all participants believed that the ability to speak English fluently and correctly was important to be successful English learners. They seemed to have a powerful image that if someone was to be good at English, the person should be able to speak English fluently, correctly and even without hesitation. Nine out of fifteen participants also indicated that a native-like accent could clearly distinguish successful from unsuccessful EFL learners. Interestingly, four of the participants from grade 10 pointed out that the use of English vocabulary and the length of vocabulary made them stand out among their classmates at school. All five respondents from grade 12 opined that ability to write well-developed essays attributed to their success in learning English.

Regarding performance in examinations, all participants reported being able to do well in English exams as an important criterion of becoming a successful EFL learner. This is because for the participant's grades were seen as an achievement indicator that is tangible and acceptable as recognized by teachers, peers, and parents. Moreover, about half of the participants (N=7) found taking English tests with confidence significant for an efficient English learner.

Another interesting finding was on teaching a skill as many participants (N=8) pointed out. Ability to teach other people English seemed to be necessary as they reasoned that if ones could teach or guide others to use English well, they would be qualified and competent enough to use English for communication, and this would be a clear sign of success. In other words, many participants justified that to be a successful English user, one role was to have a teacher-like figure to help other learners achieve a higher level of proficiency in English.

From the findings, the learners identified speaking as an important characteristic of a good English language learner. English speaking was the skill they needed to be able to pursue their present and future academic/professional as well as social endeavors. However, what most of these learners underscored was the ability to speak English confidently and correctly because they seemed to believe they had to speak English without grammatical mistakes. That all the learners emphasized the ability to converse in English more than other skills as their key criteria for having achieved in English can be pertinent to the learners' sense of accomplishment in English mostly related to the extent to which they felt they could speak English. This finding seemed to concur with Tse's (2000) finding that for the students in her study, the conversational ability was the most important criteria that reflected their actual proficiency in English more than traditional measures of academic competence.

Another issue that could be related to the participants' perceived success in learning English was their concern for correctness in the language. It can be deduced that due to the focus

on examinations and on covering the prescribed framework, correctness in the language was emphasized over the message carried by the language (Lightbown, 2000; Wells, 2003).

Some learners seemed to be referring to their experience in school. Possibly influenced by their experience with written work in their English lessons, these learners referred to the quality written work as a standard a successful learner should have. It can also be implied that good language learners or users seem to be judged based on formal learning. Thus, learners' ability to use English or specifically speak the language could be predominantly perceived from a written perspective as well.

The participants admitted placing a high value on examinations. On the one hand, this seemed to reflect the influence of an examination-oriented education system in Thailand. On the other hand, this could also be due to the fact that examination performance would determine if these learners could pursue their higher education with success. By emphasizing on preparing students for examinations, this reflects the notion implied by Hopkins (2001) that the organizational conditions of the school are closely related to classroom practice that directly and indirectly impacts student learning.

Regarding the teaching skill raised by many participants as vital in becoming successful in learning English, teaching from this perspective is the process of creating situations whereby students are able to interact with the material to be learned in order to construct knowledge. The feeling of accomplishment also seemed to relate to the idea that the learners had been given empowerment in their learning, which again reflects the notion of transmission learning. Assuming a teaching role relates to a perceived change in the learners' identity as teachers to become co-participants (Kozulin, 1998) in other learners' learning of English, making all their learning experiences more social.

The second research question deals with influences identified as contributing to their success as EFL learners. Most of the participants (N=10) referred to their own performance in class. They reported participating actively during all lessons, doing what was required of them as learners, though they hardly asked questions. This relates to the notion proposed by Wright (1987) that students may be merely acting 'in role' as learners based on the status they believed accorded to them in the classroom situation.

More than half of the participants (N=8) believed that the teacher and rapport with the English teacher helped them to succeed in learning English, without specifically indicating the teacher's age or native or non-native status. They on the other hand commented favorably on the English teacher's personality and ways of conducting lessons. Interaction with the English teacher seemed to have provided an opportunity for real language practice through informal more than formal conversations. Five participants from grade 10 agreed that the teacher seemed to have provided a chance for the learners' voices to be heard during lesson activities and within the learning framework. The teacher is always seen as a key authority in the language classroom. Supposedly as an English expert, the teacher is a facilitator who can help support learners' learning as they try to rationalize their language learning experiences (Kozulin, 1998; Williams & Burden, 1997). Simultaneously, the teacher can offer the scaffolding to enhance learners particularly in the

initial stages of learning. The teacher also seems to hold power concerning whether the learners have access to speaking and using English in context (Norton, 2000). Put differently, the teacher seems to make it possible regarding whether learners have a chance to practise different language skills. Similarly, the teacher is the person who can provide learners with emotional backing as they experience an adjustment in identity whenever using a second language. Obviously, what is important is a relationship between learners and the teacher, as this appears to affect the learners' learning and development in the language.

Three other participants mentioned school culture in particular. In their school, English is mainly used in the classroom and tested in examinations. English learning is perceived for examination purposes, and the school concentrates on classroom learning where the focus is on learners' passing the examinations. School culture includes the professional culture of educators, standards of local organization and administrative practice (Husén & Postlethwaite, 1994). Thus, the way schools in general perceive English learning could also account for the way English is used by learners within the school environment. This relates to the notion presented by Spolsky (1989) that school rationale, priorities and goals for the target language are important as they seem to determine an extent to which learners can use English in and outside the language classroom either to practice or to continue learning the target language or merely to focus on taking examinations.

Conclusion

Using an interpretive inquiry focusing on learners in the attempt to understand their perspectives of learning English in school, this study, has provided invaluable insights into how the learners discovered themselves, which can be seen as extending the research scope in the field of EFL. Findings from this study indicate that successful EFL learners do have clear conceptions of their learning experiences, demonstrating that Thai learners, given the opportunity to articulate their experiences, are able to voice their views on different issues related to their perceived success in learning of English. Future research with different target groups and types of school are worth considering. These can provide concerned stakeholders with different insights into learners' social worlds of learning English. Within the field of second language learning in EFL contexts, research into learners' perspectives in terms of their general experiences of school has not been conducted extensively. Thus, further research involving learners' perspectives on different issues of teaching and learning of English within the social context of Thai schools can be seen as broadening an understanding of second language learning.

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