

Problems and Needs in Instructing Literacy and Fluency of Reading and Writing Skills of Thai L1 Young Learners

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Abstract

The purposes of the current study were 1) to investigate problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing of Thai L1 young learners, and 2) to investigate needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing of Thai L1 young learners. There were 2 groups of participants including a group of 15 samples answering a questionnaire and a group of 10 samples taking part in an interview session. The instruments were 1) a questionnaire and 2) a structured interview to study problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai young learners and 3) a questionnaire and 4) a structured interview to study needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai young learners. The quantitative data were analyzed using percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation. Meanwhile, the results of the interview were analyzed by a qualitative analysis method. The results of the study show that 1) problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai L1 young learners are the learners' knowledge in textual language systems in terms of spelling, meaning, and uses in both receptive and productive manners; 2) needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai L1 young learners rely on finding possible solutions to solve these problems considering the nature of young learners' learning.

Keywords: literacy, fluency, need analysis

1. Introduction

Literacy is an essential skill for learners at the early stage of education. The ability to read and write is prioritized as the first skill to be acquired by young learners. According to Chall (1983), literacy widens the human's opportunities to gain knowledge in education systems. Once the ability is acquired and mastered, students can communicate in a textual language which is crucial in their education paths. However, a learner needs to comprehend how verbal communication acquired naturally prior to the educational system is formed by the lexical and grammatical regulations of the language at a level that they could create their output. These processes demand efforts on learners to learn a complex linguistic system at such an early age and on instructors to prepare an instructional method that could develop their students' skills effectively (Cameron, 2001).

Not only being able to read and write but developing an ability to use textual communication is also expected for young learners. To illustrate, students are not only developed to use a textual language correctly, however; they are expected to process input and produce output at a speed that could convey communicative processes effectively (Chambers, 1997). Fluency in reading and writing skills is considered an indicator of the development in learning a language. According to Skehan (1998), learners who acquired a language could manage working memory and linguistics knowledge to process input and produce output at a speed demanded by the conversational context and pedagogical tasks.

According to Brysbaert (2019), students at the early stage of their primary education are expected to read at the pace of 89–149 wpm. This would allow them to read uncomplicated texts in their textbook, exercises, and fiction. It is also the pace that could be developed into the next level of education. Moreover, the pace of 4–7 wpm is expected to perform by young learners in writing (Graham, Berninger, Weintraub, & Schafer, 1998). It could be noticed that productive skill takes more time to develop as it includes physical movement and the development of certain muscles. This pace would enable them to write their basic information such as names and nicknames.

In Thailand, literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills are prioritized as essential skills for learners of

young ages. The Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Ministry of Education, 2008) gives that in the first three years of basic education, students must be taught to read and write and use the skills effectively. Therefore, both the accuracy and fluency of the skills are expected to be acquired in learning the Thai language. Even though the reading speed is not mentioned in the curriculum, students at the age of 8 are expected to read basic texts of 800 words. However, the current situation in the country indicates an unsatisfying result. According to the National Institution of Education Testing Service (2020), The average score in the Thai language of Thai students was 56.26% at the end of primary education. This indicates problems in Thai language teaching. Even though the report from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018) indicates 93.8% of literacy rate of 15 years and older citizens, they seem to have problems in depth.

In finding an appropriate solution, problems should be investigated in detail. Problems in Thai education rely on various factors. Likewise, problems in the literacy of young learners should be reviewed. The first third years of basic education is essential, problems in the ability to read and write might block the development of learners. Similarly, problems in the fluency of reading and writing skills also need consideration. Students need to reach a pace of writing and reading that can support them to learn effectively. Considering these rationales, the current study aims to investigate how Thai teachers and students encounter problems in teaching and learning literacy and increasing students' pace of both skills. The purposes of the study were 1) to investigate problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing of Thai L1 young learners and 2) to investigate needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing of Thai L1 young learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Challenges in Teaching Thai Literacy

Transferring verbal to textual communicative ability is a complicated process. Acquisition of a first language starts from imitating words, trying them in sentences, evaluating the meaning of the words, and acquiring words (Hyams, 1986). According to Chomsky (1965), children as a language acquisition device that help them to acquire and produce language. These processes happen naturally without systems of texts used as a representation of sound. In reading and writing, learners start to learn how the verbal language they use on daily basis operates in a textual form which could be complicated for them especially in the early stage of education. In learning the Thai language, students have to deal with 44 alphabets, 21 vowels, and 4 tones. A change in tone changes the meaning of the word completely. Moreover, considering that the Thai language is in the Kra-dai language family also makes it complicated as there are loan words from other languages such as Khmer, Bali, and Sanskrit. These variables put a burden on young learners who are expected to develop such a complicated ability at the early stage of their learning paths.

2.2 Challenges in Developing Fluency in Reading and Writing Skills

The ability to read and write is essential for learners, and the pace in the abilities cannot be ignored. Students also need to practice and master the skill at a level that they can use the ability at a speed that contributes to success in learning (Chambers, 1997). However, learners face challenges in enabling themselves to read and write fluently. First, fluency needs mastery in skills, and the Thai language is a difficult skill to be master. The structures of the alphabet, vowel, and tone systems make it difficult to decode and produce. It takes effort for students at a young age to understand these regulations. Therefore, fluency might be developed later when the language is fully acquired. Psychologically, fluency could be driven out by a trade-off effect in the case that learners are forced to perform a difficult task (Skehan, 2009). It is assumed that learners would shift to focus on meaning-making the speed of communication faster. However, they would not focus on accuracy. As a result, for young learners whose knowledge of the language is not fully acquired, the pace of reading and writing might come with inaccuracy.

2.3 Previous Studies

It seems that literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills are essential in education, there are challenges in developing the abilities. Studies have been conducted to investigate the causes of the problems and possibilities to solve them (e.g., Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014; Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012; Phiwhlaung, Kaitjarunphan, & Siriwatthanathakun, 2020; Savic, 2016). For instance, Murnane, Sawhill and Snow (2012) suggested that primary grade students in American schools lack opportunities to learn the issues that are related to literacy. Even though they can read the texts, the meaning beyond the texts is not comprehended. Moreover, the authors suggested that social disparity is a factor affecting the illiteracy of some students. Moreover, Savic (2016) indicated that problems of young learners' reading skills vary from mispronunciation, substitution, omission, insertion, and rereading. This inaccurate word reading also indicates incomprehensible and slow reading. Furthermore, Copland, Garton and Burns (2014) suggested that motivation is a crucial issue for young

learners in the instruction of English of both L1 and L2. Especially, for the students in the rural area who percept the language as an unimportant skill for their daily life. Locally, Phiwlaung, Kaitjarunphan and Siriwatthanathakun (2020) indicated that L1 learners of the Thai language face difficulties in learning in terms of mentality, society, emotion, and attitude. It is suggested that students showed negative attitudes toward Thai language courses as they are complicated. The participants believed that they could use the language in daily life and at work; therefore, regulations and aesthetics of the language instructed in the courses are unnecessary.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

There were 2 groups of participants including a group of 15 samples answering a questionnaire and a group of 10 samples taking part in an interview session. The former included 5 educational inspectors, 5 school administrators, 5 Thai language teachers. The latter included educational inspectors, school administrators, and teachers in the total number of 10. Participants from both groups were selected using purposive sampling methods. The participants were treated anonymously.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments were 1) a questionnaire and 2) a structured interview to study problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai young learners and 3) a questionnaire and 4) a structured interview to study needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai young learners. The questionnaires were designed on 5 Likert scales, and the interview questions were related to problems and needs in instructing the skills. All research instruments were validated by 5 experts in instructional management, and the indexes of consistency (IOC) of question items were at .80–1.00.

3.3 Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation. Meanwhile, the results of the interview were analyzed by a thematic analysis method. The participants' interviews were grouped into themes that could represent their opinion toward problems and needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai L1 young learners.

4. Results

4.1 To Investigate Problems in Instructing Literacy and Fluency of Reading and Writing Skills of Thai L1 Young Learners

Table 1. Problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills

Items	\bar{X}	S.D	Interpretation
Reading			
1. Students in my classes have problems in the verbal reading of alphabets, vowels, and tones.	4.46	.51	High
2. Students in my classes have problems in verbal reading at the level of word and sentence.	4.00	1.06	High
3. Students in my classes have problems in verbal reading in the selected topics.	4.33	.61	High
4. Students in my classes cannot expertise verbal reading.	4.20	.56	High
5. Students in my class cannot follow the rules of verbal reading.	4.20	.56	High
6. Students in my classes cannot comprehend the words they read.	4.53	.63	Very High
7. Students in my classes lack reading skills.	4.33	.61	High
Average	4.29	.44	High
Writing			
8. Students in my classes have problems in writing related to alphabets, vowels, and tones.	4.13	.63	High
9. Students in my classes have writing problems at the level of word and sentence.	4.66	.48	Very High
10. Students in my classes have problems in writing selected topics.	4.53	.63	Very High
11. Students in my classes cannot be expertise in spelling.	4.46	.63	High
12. Students in my classes cannot follow the regulations of writing.	4.53	.63	Very High
13. Students in my classes cannot write to express their knowledge.	4.33	.72	High
14. Students in my classes cannot write to narrate a story.	4.60	.50	Very High
15. Students in my classes cannot write to express emotions and experiences.	3.93	.79	High
Average	4.40	.44	High
Fluency of reading			
16. Students in my classes cannot correctly pronounce reading texts.	3.86	1.12	High
17. Students in my classes cannot follow rules in verbal reading.	4.53	.51	Very High
18. Students in my classes cannot reach the expected pace of reading	3.46	1.06	High

Items	\bar{X}	S.D	Interpretation
19. Students in my classes cannot summarize the main idea of the texts.	3.80	1.08	High
Average	3.91	.75	High
Fluency of writing			
20. Students in my classes cannot write words correctly.	3.53	.99	High
21. Students in my classes cannot write in a sentence.	3.80	.94	High
22. Students in my classes cannot write given sentences.	4.26	.88	High
23. Students in my classes cannot write in narration.	4.33	.72	High
24. Students in my classes cannot follow the regulations in writing.	4.20	.56	High
25. Students in my classes cannot reach the expected speed of writing.	4.33	.61	High
Average	3.65	.98	High
Overall	4.22	.45	High

The result of the study indicates a high level of problems related to literacy instruction of young Thai L1 learners ($\bar{x}=4.22$, S.D=.45). In detail, The participants reported that problems in their Thai reading classes were at a high level ($\bar{x}=4.29$, S.D=.44). Young students in the participants' classes seemed to have problems in pronouncing textual content in terms of alphabets, vowels, and tones in both word and sentence levels. Moreover, it was also reported that the students did not know the meaning of the words they read. In terms of writing, the problem was also at a high level ($\bar{x}=4.40$, S.D=.44). Particularly, students were reported to encounter problems in writing word, sentence, story levels. They failed to write in topics, narration, expression, and knowledge transference. In addition, problems in instructing reading fluency were reported to be at a high level ($\bar{x}=3.91$, S.D=.75). It was reported that students fail to reach the expected pace of reading and to accurately express the text verbally. Lastly, problems in instructing fluency of writing were found at a high level ($\bar{x}=3.65$, S.D=.98). In this case, students failed to produce textual output at an expected speed in word, sentence, and composition levels. Furthermore, the following issues could be raised considering the qualitative result gained from the interview.

4.1.1 The Importance of Literacy and Fluency of Reading and Writing Skills

It could be synthesized from the interview data that the participants prioritize literacy as a students' fundamental skill in learning. Therefore, the first theme interpreted from the data was the importance of literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills. It was expected that the students should have fluency in both reading and writing skills. For example, a teacher in the interview group reported that "Reading and writing are skills that can expand the knowledge of young learners. Enabling young students to read and write accurately and fluently would develop their life quality in the future".

4.1.2 Problems in Literacy and Fluency of Reading and Writing Skills

It could not be denied learners had problems learning to read and write effectively in the Thai language which leads to the second theme of problems in literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills. The causes of problems were various. The following issues could be noticed in the interview. First, the participants claimed that their students lacked motivation in learning. For example, a teacher in the interview group reported that "Many students in my class do not understand why they have to study the Thai language. They feel not motivated in learning, and regulations of the language make them bored." Moreover, the issue of dialect interference was also noticed. A teacher pointed that "I can notice dialect accent in my students' Thai reading pronunciation. However, I understand this interference, and I know practices would make their verbal reading better." Lastly, students' concentration differentiated class outcomes. "The most difficult part of teaching is making young learners in my class concentrate. Learning to spell and pronounce a language is complicated. Many students found it was too difficult and lost concentration" reported a teacher interviewee.

4.2 To Investigate Needs in Instructing Literacy and Fluency of Reading and Writing Skills of Thai Grade 2 Primary School Students

Table 2. Needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills

Items	\bar{X}	S.D	Interpretation
Reading			
1. I want the students in my classes to verbally read alphabets, vowels, and tones correctly.	3.86	.83	High
2. I want the students in my classes to be able to verbally read syllables, words, and sentences.	3.93	.79	High
3. I want the students in my classes to be able to verbally read in selected topics.	4.00	.65	High
4. I want the students in my classes to be able to expertise in verbal reading.	4.13	.83	High
5. I want the students in my classes to be able to verbally read following language rules.	4.13	.74	High

Items	\bar{X}	S.D	Interpretation
6. I want the students in my classes to be able to comprehend the meaning of the words they read.	4.40	.63	High
7. I want the students in my classes to be able to develop reading skills.	4.33	.61	High
Average	4.11	.57	High
Writing			
8. I want the students in my classes to be able to correctly use alphabets, vowels, and tones in writing.	4.13	.63	High
9. I want the students in my classes to be able to write at the word and sentence levels.	4.53	.63	Very High
10. I want the students in my classes to be able to write on selected topics.	4.13	.83	High
11. I want the students in my classes to be able to be expertise in spelling.	4.33	.72	High
12. I want the students in my classes to be able to spell words following language regulations.	4.40	.63246	High
13. I want the students in my classes to be able to write to express knowledge.	4.26	.79881	High
14. I want the students in my classes to be able to write narrating stories.	4.40	.63	High
15. I want the students in my classes to be able to write in expressing emotions and experiences.	4.06	.70	High
Average	4.28	.50	High
Reading fluency			
16. I want the students in my classes to be able to correctly pronounce reading texts.	4.00	.84	High
17. I want the students in my classes to be able to pronounce words following language structures.	4.20	.86	High
18. I want the students in my classes to be able to reach the expected reading pace.	3.86	.83	High
19. I want the students in my classes to be able to understand the main ideas of the texts.	4.20	.86	High
Average	4.06	.62	High
Writing fluency			
20. I want the students in my classes to be able to spell words correctly.	3.93	.70	High
21. I want the students in my classes to be able to write sentences.	4.06	.88	High
22. I want the students in my classes to be able to write given sentences.	4.20	.56	High
23. I want the students in my classes to be able to write to narrate stories.	4.20	.67	High
24. I want the students in my classes to be able to write with correct language structures.	4.00	.75	High
25. I want the students in my classes to be able to reach the expected writing pace.	3.93	.79	High
Average	4.05	.58	High
Overall	4.14	.51	High

The result of the study indicates a high level of needs related to literacy instruction of young Thai L1 learners (\bar{x} =4.14, S.D=.51). In detail, The participants reported that their needs in improving their Thai reading classes were at a high level (\bar{x} =4.11, S.D=.57). It was reported that the participants need an improvement in verbal reading in terms of understanding of spelling regulation, correctness in pronunciation, and comprehension of word meaning. In terms of writing, the need was also at a high level (\bar{x} =4.28, S.D=.50). The participants were eager to improve their students' writing skills in terms of comprehension of spelling systems, uses of vocabulary in sentence and composition, and uses of vocabulary in various types of writing such as narration, expression, and topic writing. In addition, needs in developing students' reading fluency were reported to be at a high level (\bar{x} =4.05, S.D=.58). It was reported that the participants need to develop their students to reach the expected pace of reading. Likewise, needs in instructing fluency of writing were found at a high level (\bar{x} =4.05, S.D=.58). Participants set a goal to increase the pace of their students' writing. Moreover, the following issue could be raised considering the qualitative result gained from the interview.

4.2.1 Needs in Solving Problems in Instructing Literacy and Fluency in Reading and Writing Skills

The priority was to solve the problems in instructing literacy and fluency in reading and writing skills as they are fundamental in learning. Therefore, the theme could be considered. One of the inspector interviewees suggested that "These problems should be dealt with seriously. Students without literacy skills could not learn other subjects, and this will ruin their future". The participants also reported that there should be an instructional method that could serve needs in developing young learners' literacy and fluency of reading and writing in their classes. First, the method should contribute to a meaningful learning environment. A school administrator interviewee suggested that "Young students need to be motivated. They need to know how the content learned in classes is used in their life. Therefore, the content should not be too long but focus only on benefits of students." Moreover, there is a need of the method that could make the class enjoyable. A teacher interviewee suggested that the "Teaching method should consist of joyful activities that involve learners' participation. Young students are easily distracted by the environment. Therefore, they have to be attracted with activities that can make them move, smile, and laugh".

5. Discussions

5.1 Problems in Instructing Literacy and Fluency of Reading and Writing Skills of Thai L1 Young Learners

The results of the study indicate problems in both literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills in Thai L1 young learners. In detail, learners of early age in the Thai context face difficulties in comprehending the spelling system in terms of alphabets, vowels, and tones. Therefore, they made mistakes in pronouncing words in verbal reading. Furthermore, Thai young L1 students seem to have problems understanding the meaning of words class contents. As a result, they found it difficult to understand passages and stories. The result of the study adds up evidence indicating struggle in learning the receptive mode of textual communication (e.g., Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014; Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012; Phiwhlaung, Kaitjarungphan, & Siriwatthanathakun, 2020; Savic, 2016). It seems that learners at the early stage of education could be in a difficult situation in learning acquiring literacy as they encounter differences between spoken acquired before school and written languages learned in school. Some features could confuse learners, especially in such a complex language as Thai. It needs careful consideration of matters to help them overcome the difficulty.

The results of the study also indicate the causes of literacy and fluency problems in the Thai context. It could be noticed that Thai learners lack motivation in developing language features that are not used on a daily basis. In this case, it was pointed that at the early stage of language development, learners could be demotivated as the complicated regulations of the standardized language might not appear in their routines (Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014). This is a challenge for instructors to motivate the students and let them aware of the goal of language learning (Dornyei, 1998). It could also be noted that students' dialects could affect learners' reading pronunciation in verbal reading practice. Winch and Gingell (1994) indicated that learners' language learning processes could be interfered with by their dialects. The familiarity of dialect accents might affect how learners produce words. However, if the meaning of the words is conveyed, the communication can progress. Furthermore, the concentration of young learners was reported to be responsible for young learners' problems in learning reading and writing. The concentration and attention of young learners are crucial issues for instructors to consider (Bundesen, 1990). It is the nature of children who have just started their educational journey. Therefore, instructional methods should be designed to match their limited attentional capacity.

It was also reported that the fluency of reading and writing skills is also a problem in learners' educational paths. The skill is more challenging to be acquired as learners have to master the language feature to process input and produce output at a certain pace. Moreover, it is more difficult considering the requirement of the courses that expect learners to produce accurate and fluent output. According to Skehan (1998), Skehan and Foster (2001), learners in the developing processes of linguistic features could trade fluency for accuracy in producing output they have not yet acquired. Therefore, the students with limited knowledge of Thai language vocabulary and grammar hardly produce output that is both accurate and fluent.

5.2 Needs in Instructing Literacy and Fluency of Reading and Writing Skills of Thai L1 Young Learners

The study also suggests factors leading to success in developing young learners' literacy and fluency in reading and writing. First, it is shown that the skills, as fundamental abilities in learning, need attention from stakeholders including teachers, school administrators, and policymakers. Cameron (2001) suggested that literacy is the first door to educational success. Failing to acquire the skills is a great obstacle in ones' future. Moreover, the results of the study also suggest a meaningful learning environment that could motivate learners to realize the importance of the skills. Dornyei (1998) indicates that an instructional method that could illustrate how the learning content is beneficial in learners' lives and education tends to motivate students to learn effectively. Therefore, implementing instructional methods that convince young students could be one of the possible solutions to the problem. Moreover, joyful and participable learning activities could help young learners to concentrate on class content. Cronqvist (2021) indicates that joy and participation are important in young learners' skill development. Making them feel enjoyable and stick to the activities could make them learn.

6. Conclusion

The study could be concluded that 1) problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai L1 young learners are the learners' knowledge in textual language systems in terms of spelling, meaning, and uses in both receptive and productive manners. This affects the speed rate of the skills making students fail to reach the expected pace required by courses. 2) needs in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai L1 young learners rely on finding possible solutions to solve these problems. It could be noted that problems in instructing literacy and fluency of reading and writing skills of Thai L1 young learners are derived from the complication of Thai language grammatical structures and vocabulary and the nature of young learners' learning. Therefore, finding possible solutions to the problems could consider concentration,

attention, motivation, joy, and participants which are crucial in teaching learners at the early stage of education. It must be noted that literacy is a starting point in education. Learners' success depends on how well they manage to cross the threshold.

The result of the study could be implicated in a pedagogical aspect. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers could be aware of problems in instructing Thai literacy to young learners in the country. Moreover, the causes of the problems should be realized in selecting instructional methods that could solve the problems. Curriculum designers should be aware that meaningful, joyful, and participable learning activities are potential in developing young learners who are likely to have issues of concentration and motivation in learning. The demand for a level of Thai language in the course also needs consideration. It should be noted that young learners are between implementing spoken language in the real-world and learning textual language in their education. This is a great challenge for children at the age of 7 or 8. Therefore, class content might be adapted to match their nature of learning. The results of the study could also be implicated from an academic point of view. The information presented in the current study could be evidence of the current situation of Thai literacy teaching in young learners. Further studies could investigate more at students' point of view as the current study only present the data gained from teachers, school administrators, and educational inspectors. Furthermore, further studies could use the data presented in the results of the study to be base information in selecting a solution to the problems. Problems and needs reviewed in the study could be considered before selecting principles to design instructional methods. Literacy and fluency in reading and writing are essential for young learners. The understanding of the current situation in the context could help young learners overcome challenges in developing their textual communication abilities.

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