



## Exploring English Language Instruction at a Local Thai Teachers College: A Qualitative Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated how local Thai teachers came to view opportunities and challenges they faced in teaching foundation English to Thai university students. Specifically, this study explored EFL teaching in a provincial university in Thailand by focusing on six Thai EFL teachers, selected by means of purposive sampling. Data was collected through in-depth interviews. The interview protocol consisted of four general domains: the pedagogy, teaching materials, evaluation, and general points of view toward EFL teaching in Thailand. Salient findings revealed that effective pedagogy needed to address local contexts and concerns which encompasses such key components as appropriate teaching approaches, teaching materials, assessment. Last but not least, the participants realized that there is considerable room for improvement as far as their teaching contingencies were concerned.

**Keywords:** ELT opportunities and challenges, local EFL teachers' voices, effective teaching

### Introduction

Reports on English language instruction problems in the ESL/EFL context have been somewhat disheartening and the teaching situation in Thailand has not fared any better (e.g., Akbari & Hosseini, 2008; Ellis, 2005; Pica, 1997; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Naji & Pishghadam, 2013; Yung, 2015). The vast majority of Thai students have lagged behind their international counterparts in terms of English proficiency. This has been a cause for concern if Thailand is to make progress in its national development. While there are many factors involved that have created this bleak picture of the EFL situation in Thailand, the local teacher, in this case the Thai teacher of English, is a very important consideration. This is because in the EFL situation, the local teacher seems to be the most common source of language input to which local students are exposed. Therefore, this study attempted to explore English language teaching opportunities and challenges at a local Thai teachers college. More specifically, the study wanted to ascertain viewpoints of some selected teachers at the teachers college, results of which might shed light on the kinds of opportunities and challenges faced by the participants.

As mentioned briefly above, a number of studies have investigated opportunities and challenges in various EFL contexts, relatively few studies have focused on instructional opportunities and challenges in teachers' colleges with an emphasis on

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teachers' voices concerning their everyday teaching activities, broadly defined. This study sought to fill the gap by paying close attention to the local teachers college. According to Crandall (2000), there is a sea change in language teacher education. As she puts it, "there is a shift from transmission, product-oriented theories to constructivist, process-oriented theories of learning, teaching and teacher learning." (p. 34). Given this shift in focus, it is imperative that research should be conducted to ascertain local teachers' voices regarding their everyday instructional opportunities and challenges. In this study, I attempted to gain a better understanding of opportunities and challenges they have grappled with in teaching the four skills of English language learning, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. While the teaching of such skills may, on the surface, appear to be rather mundane, its focus is important and relevant. This is because the majority of their students seem to lack sufficient proficiency in all these skills; these are challenges encountered by local teachers who deal with foundation English courses.

Given the focus of this study which is to heed the voices of local English teachers regarding opportunities and challenges in teaching English in their educational context, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What do local Thai teachers perceive as opportunities and challenges in teaching English to Thai students?
2. How do they deal with such opportunities and challenges?

### **Focused literature review**

The literature review centers on the key concept of learning opportunities. According to Crabbe (2003), the ultimate goal of L2 learning is to provide the L2 learner with "learning opportunities." Such opportunities could be described in a generic sense as learning opportunities accorded by and through educational schemes and in a particular SLA domain as providing language-use opportunities, hence the necessity of discussing the input-interaction and output model below.

#### *The input-interaction-output model of second language acquisition (SLA)*

It has been proposed by several SLA researchers that second language (L2) learners learn an L2 by exposing themselves to large and frequent enough input (Krashen, 1982), by obtaining not only good quality L2 input but also opportunities to produce L2 meaningfully—the so-called output (Swain, 1985). Still Long (1990) suggested that receiving input and producing output may not be sufficient because L2 learners are not computers waiting to process information. Rather, those L2 learners need opportunities to have meaningful interaction in which they are allowed to use the L2 themselves. In other words, the input-interaction-output model of SLA implies that L2 learners need to do something with the language in order to make linguistic progress.

While the input-interaction-output model is viable to some extent, it has received a fair share of criticism. For instance, Krashen's input hypothesis overemphasizes the importance of input because most, if not all, EFL learners do not normally receive good quality language input. Indeed, most of them are deprived of such anticipated input. In addition, Swain's output hypothesis advances that L2 learners must be pushed to produce language in both speech and writing. The importance of this notwithstanding, most Thai



EFL learners do not need to use English for daily communication, thereby having no real opportunities to speak or write the language. And as far as Long's interaction hypothesis is concerned, a large number of Thai EFL students are subjected to the same predicament; that is, they are not required to use English in their interaction with other fellow Thais, therefore denying themselves opportunities to use English.

Given the dearth of opportunities to use English, Thai EFL students are put in a position where they either have to actively seek English-rich opportunities or remain inadequate in their English ability. This is a cause for concern because Thailand has now entered the AEC community era when they are expected to function in English sufficiently well. This dilemma has put considerable pressure on not only their parents, school administrators but also local English teachers. In fact, local English teachers are believed to play pivotal roles in motivating L2 learners to do better in English. It is the teachers who can make it happen. In the next section, I will discuss the traditional teaching methods and more recent teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching.

#### *Traditional teaching methods and the current teaching approach*

Traditional teaching methods commonly refer to the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods, both of which focus on linguistic accuracy at the expense of meaning and functions of language. As is well known, these two major methods of English language teaching have been in existence for ages. In fact, it is relatively easy to implement these two methods in a typical EFL classroom because all that local teachers need to do is to strictly follow instructional steps as detailed in them. For example, in using grammar-translation techniques, the teacher needs to provide samples of linguistic features they want to teach and ask students to simply copy down those features. Subsequently, students will be tested on those taught features. Essentially, the grammar-translation method encourages students to properly regurgitate lessons learned.

When it comes to the audiolingual method, the teacher is required to just provide good examples for students who then are expected to form good language habits. Therefore, repetition and mimicking previously taught language patterns in the language laboratory must be prioritized over students' initiative and creativity in learning an L2.

Because of the shortcomings of these two traditional teaching methods, a supposedly practical teaching approach was introduced to the English teaching world: the communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT). According to Richards (2013), CLT takes as its starting point the fact that language is for communication. Therefore, it attempts to present language samples to the L2 learner that indicate how form, function and meaning of language should be mixed to enable L2 learners to use the L2 not only grammatically correctly but also appropriately. In fact, Richards suggested that CLT is an example of "...a movement away from master-oriented approaches focusing on the production of accurate samples of language use, to the use of more activity-oriented approaches focusing on interactive and communicative classroom processes" (p. 6). According to Canagarajah (2012), CLT affords the L2 learner and teacher real opportunity to use an L2, English being the case in point.

Although CLT has been proposed as a remedy to the teaching ills as a result of the implementation of the traditional teaching methods: grammar-translation and audiolingualism, it has received a fair amount of criticism. For example, CLT does not



take into consideration individual, specific contexts of teaching which may not be in sync with what CLT advocates purport. In other words, CLT provides a sweeping claim that what works in one instructional context will also work in another context (Li, 1998; Tarvin & Al-Arishi, 1991).

In response to the limitation of teaching methods, Kumaravadivelu (2006) proposed the postmethod pedagogy in order to transcend the restrictive roles of current teaching methods, which implies that there should be one way of doing the right thing. The postmethod pedagogy suggests that, in order to best achieve teaching and learning results, one should first consider the L2 context involved. Working from the ground up, the teacher may be placed in a better position to help the L2 learner learn with relative ease and success. Therefore, it can be concluded that the ELT scenario has experienced major shifts in teaching methods and approaches. Certainly, the quest is still going on in a more flexible manner in hopes of achieving a win-win situation.

The two traditional teaching methods, and the more contemporary teaching approach discussed above have been, more or less, practiced in Thai EFL situations with varying degrees of success and failure. Further, in discussing the rate of success and failure of English language instruction, one key factor that cannot be overlooked is the local teacher—a focus of this study.

### **Previous studies**

This section provides a brief overview of research studies that have examined several aspects of the local EFL teachers ranging from their pedagogical systems, beliefs, and instructional knowledge. I will discuss these respectively.

In 2001, Borg conducted his qualitative research on teachers' pedagogical systems and grammar teaching in an English language institute in Malta, a Mediterranean center for TEFL. His study aimed to explore the nature of the pedagogical systems L2 teachers utilize in determining the role and nature of grammar teaching in their classroom practice. The data came from pre-observation interviews with a male native speaker of English with over 15-year experience being involved in TEFL and 15 hours of his classroom observations.

His data were organized around the teaching behaviors concerning grammar work. There were five strategies that the teacher used for working with grammar: analyzing students' grammatical errors, encouraging students to refer to their L1: using explicit discussions of grammatical issues: eliciting the grammar rules through the class interactions, and using practice activities. The participant also revealed that there were conflicts about varieties of teaching and learning issues. Although he believed that traditional grammar teaching probably does not enhance students' communicative ability, he employed such approach for some reasons. For instance, it makes students aware of grammatical errors as well as enhances students' self-correction. It should be noted that, according to Borg's study, the external forces (e.g., the school society, parents, classroom and school layout) did not appear to interfere with the participant's pedagogical system. However, he was influenced by internal factors or the course of instruction itself.

When it comes to the EFL teaching of Thai context, the beliefs of Thai EFL teachers have been reviewed. Trinant (2003) examined beliefs of two Thai male teachers of English language toward their career and the method of teaching English in their classroom. The participants were both male from different universities. Teacher A has



been teaching English for over ten years and Teacher B has over six years of teaching experience. The semi-structured interview approach was adapted in this study.

The responses of each participant were categorized into major themes which are 1) becoming an English language teacher, 2) being an English language teacher, 3) beliefs about teaching methods/teaching effectiveness, 4) becoming a dedicated teacher, and 5) looking into the future: five year ahead. The results show that the participants were satisfied with their careers. They were well prepared and qualified for the career as teachers of English. Although different methods were believed to be suitable the most for their students, they shared the same objective in teaching of English. They were aware of the current theories of SLA in their teaching.

Wongkamalasai (2007) explored pedagogical knowledge of Thai EFL teachers concerning its consistency with the existing theories/hypotheses of SLA. Semi-structured interviews with six English reading for Academic Purposes teachers are analyzed using selected SLA theories as a framework. As for the results, five salient themes emerged from the interview data: 1) explicit grammar instruction; 2) source of materials; 3) L1 use in reading classroom; 4) roles of teacher and students; 5) perceived effective EFL teaching. The first four themes concern the participants' teaching experiences in reading classes and the last theme is related to their opinions on effective EFL teaching. The results indicated that teachers' pedagogical knowledge is compatible with certain SLA theories and hypotheses. It also revealed that participants' styles of teaching cannot be neatly classified into the two common dichotomies: the traditional versus communicative methods, and focus on formS versus focus on form instructions.

Based on the literature review described above, it appears that more research should be conducted that investigates how Thai teachers of English at a teachers college outside of Bangkok have come to understand challenges and opportunities inherent in their teaching profession. The context of situation they were in should inform current SLA theories, especially those that deal with instructed SLA. This study represents the development in that direction.

## **Methodology**

### **Data collection**

The study employed semi-structured interviews. According to Glesne (2016), “[in a semi-structured interview] questions often emerge in the course of fieldwork and may add or replace pre-established ones” (p. 96). This characteristic of a semi-structured interview was deemed appropriate for this study because it allowed for much flexibility during the course of interviews.

### **Participants**

The participants ( $n = 6$ ) were full-time lecturers of English teaching at a provincial teachers' college in the lower North of Thailand, and were selected through a purposive sampling technique. That is, they represented an intact group of participants. They varied in the number of teaching experiences from 2 years to 20 years. These were considered an intact group of participants. They all taught a variety of English courses,



ranging from English language skills to linguistics. See Appendix A for each participant's demographics and courses taught.

## **Questions**

As stated above, the semi-structured interview was used in face-to-face interviews in order to allow the researcher to acquire in-depth information. To achieve the purposes of this study, 18 open-ended questions were employed. The interview questions consisted of four general domains: the pedagogy, teaching material, evaluation, and points of view toward EFL teaching in Thailand. The participants were asked what problems they faced in the EFL class and how they dealt with such situations. The actual questions can be found in Appendix 1.

## **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed. The analysis began with open coding, followed by axial and selective coding (Glesne, 2016). In so doing, the researcher asked a colleague to read through the transcripts and discussed emerging themes. This led to a sufficient level of interrater reliability.

## **Findings and Discussions**

The findings to be reported and discussed below suggest both opportunities and challenges. In so doing, the researcher categorized the participants' answers based on several major domains such as generic, pedagogy, teaching materials, evaluation and points of views towards EFL teaching in Thailand (see Appendix B: Summary of Questions in Relation to Each Domain). Below are the main domains of answers that point to both opportunities and challenges.

### **Generic items**

According to questions 1, 2 and 3, the participants were asked the question, "What are the problems found in class?" "How do you deal with such problems?" and "If you could choose, what kind of students would you like to teach?". The answers to question 1 emerged into four themes which were a) low English proficiency score (N=5), b) narrow vocabulary (N=3), c) the low motivation (N=1), and d) inappropriate course syllabus. The answers to question 2 can be seen in three salient themes; a) contributing classroom activities (N=3), b) review basic grammar all over again (N=3) and, c) using sarcastic strategy to increase students' motivation.

According to the answers, low proficiency score encompasses low proficiency in all basic skills. The participants stated that when students performed poorly, they performed poorly in all basic skills. That is, when their vocabulary is not good, their listening, speaking, reading, and writing scores are all low.

Teachers A, C and F stated that their students did not possess enough vocabulary. Often times, they were asked about the meaning of the basic vocabulary but they could not give correct translation. As such, they failed to write well. Misspelling seemed to be the most obvious indicator of not having adequate vocabulary. In addition, certain



inappropriate words were used. For example, a word used in an informal situation was used in a piece of writing which required formality. Teacher A, for example, provided a comment on the poor proficiency score as follows,

The students understand what I say and understand the assignment but when it comes to verbal communication in classroom, they have difficulties expressing ideas they would like to share in English. This inability can result from their anxiety. For example, a word used in an informal situation was used in a writing which required formality. As far as reading is concerned, they are able to read and write. But their writing is below the advanced level. Even when they know the format, they simply cannot write because they have no adequate vocabulary. For example, when assigned to write an academic abstract, they cannot do it despite the fact that an example is provided.

From the quote above, one can readily see that the teachers are well aware of the problems. They also know the causes (whether they are the real causes or not). What is important is whether the situation is rectified. Knowing (guessing) the causes is no use if the teachers do not try to fix them. It should be interesting to see if the teacher attempts to do something to lessen the level of anxiety which they believe to be the root of all the problems identified.

Consequently, in order to solve the problems, some teachers (N=3) employ classroom activities, such as role-plays and presentations, to improve the proficiency score of their students, to reduce the anxiety of the students in class, and to expand the vocabulary. Teacher E stated that "The students were assigned to make presentations in front of the class. I found that they were more active and enjoyed the class activity more than the actual lecture from the teacher. Activities such as this force them to speak English; whether they spoke correctly in terms of grammar or not, they performed the activity without any kind of evaluation or correction from the teacher." Some teachers (N=3) solve the problem by reviewing the basic grammar of which they feel their students lack the knowledge. For example, Teacher B said "...sometimes it's very difficult to teach them the new lesson because they cannot recall the basic grammar rules to facilitate the given chapter. What I can do is just stop following the syllabus and review it all over again"

There are instances of some participants having different problems. Teacher D for instance, asserted that the main problems he often found were the low motivation and the inappropriate course syllabus. This informant recalled that

I found that the students with low motivation majoring in English did not take the entrance examination. They were not tested on their English proficiency when applying to the university. Later on, they found that majoring in English was not their preference. On the other hand, some students have high motivation but they still have low proficiency scores. Another problem is the inappropriate course syllabus. The basic courses are not offered at the beginning of the semester. For example, instead of teaching phonetics in the first semester, the phonetics course appears later in the undergraduate program.

In this study *motivation* is defined as "the effort learners put into learning an L2 as a result of their desire or need to learn it." As for the general assumption of the relationship between motivation and L2 learning, it is widely believed that a highly motivated learner learns faster and is more successful. According to Teacher D, the problem he found can be the evident showing that lowly motivated students stop developing their L2 learning. In contrast, most students who have high motivation, with



low English proficiency scores, facilitate learning activities in L2 classroom. The teacher solves the problems by using sarcastic remarks to motivate his students. He said “I am not a good motivation booster but I often use sarcastic remarks to heighten their motivation. I emphasize their weaknesses and tell them that they have to develop their English proficiency which is lower than the desired standard of undergrad students”.

Such a problem may result from the entrance policy of the university. There is no testing process in order to recruit the candidate who wants to be the English major student. To him, he feels uncomfortable teaching the inappropriate syllabus designed by the faculty. He believes that the basic linguistics courses, such as phonetics, should be taught to students at the beginning of the study program. These might be the factors that we should take into consideration when it comes to the success and failure in L2 acquisition.

As far as the preferences of the participants are concerned, they were asked to choose, if they could, between teaching the high and the low English proficiency students (Question 3). According to the data, five participants (N=5) expressed interests in teaching the high proficiency students and only one informant (N=1) chose the low proficiency learners. All participants who would like to teach high proficiency students argued that teaching clever students facilitated their self-learning process when preparing the lessons for their students. They have to be well prepared when they have to teach such the students. Some participants felt that they enjoyed teaching the communicative classes when the communication flowed between both parties (teacher and learners). Teacher A said “If I could choose, I’d like to teach the high proficiency students because we can make it two-way communication and they respond to every questions I ask. It contributes a good environment in the language classroom.”

As for Teacher B, however, she prefers teaching low proficiency students. She stated that she would consider herself successful if her students showed signs of development.

## **Pedagogy**

Questions 4 – 7 were designed to elicit the answers regarding the teaching methods and approaches the participants use in their classes. That is, do you emphasize grammar teaching? If so, how do you teach grammar? If not, why? (question 4). Question 5 was “Do you teach the pronunciation?” Question 6 aimed at asking whether or not they used the integrated approach. And question 7 was “Which language has been used in teaching English?”

According to the data, all participants (N=6) shared the same perception that grammar should be taught. Two, however, stated that grammar should be taught only when teaching writing (Teachers E and F). These two therefore teach grammar only in their composition classes. In classes of which the objective is communication, these two teachers agreed that grammar was not necessary. Students’ expected performance is their ability to use English communicatively. Though the output contains grammatical errors, it is acceptable as long as communication flows. Slightly different in terms of viewing grammar teaching, Teachers A and B used the learner-centered method. They provided their students with a number of examples and demanded that the students induce the grammatical rules from the sentences given. This, in a sense, means that students discover grammar rules while working through exercises. Teacher B reiterated,



“grammar needs to be taught to the students but I will teach them implicitly by providing examples and let them analyze the examples and arrive at their own rules”. Teachers C and D, on the other hand, taught grammar explicitly to their students. The students were asked to recognize grammatical rules and then they were assigned to work on their own with teacher’s assistance during the learning process.

As for Question 5, the participants were asked whether they emphasized pronunciation. All participants (N=6) confirmed that they put emphasis on pronunciation when teaching. Teachers E and F explicitly told their students how sounds were produced, while Teachers A and C asked their students to imitate pronunciation from the audio recordings and movies played to the classes. Corrective feedbacks were given for pronunciation in Teachers A and D classes. Teacher A recalled that “the students practiced their pronunciation from sound-track movies and audio recordings. They received corrective feedback when they mispronounced words” This is to say, when students’ outputs were incorrect, all the participants provided correction directly to the learners.

Question 6 asked whether teachers used integrative teaching. Not stating what they meant by “integrative”, all said “yes” to the question. When asked to clarify the terms, they stated that it meant all skills were taught simultaneously. That is, while communication is the focus, grammar was implicitly taught and pronunciation was emphasized. Even in a speaking class, students must listen, speak, read and write. With there was a demand for the teachers to allow all for skills to be heightened, they inevitably have to be able to teach all four skills.

Regarding the medium of instruction (Question 7), all stated that they basically used the target language. Teacher F, however, admitted that he used Thai more often than English. The other participants stated that they mostly used English. No one specifically stated that when and why Thai was used. The teachers who used English more often reasoned that if they spoke English, their students would have an opportunity to improve their listening skill. However, additional to teachers’ utterances, authentic materials such as movies were employed to allow students to be exposed to real life English. The section below deals with questions regarding teaching materials.

## Teaching Materials

Questions 8-11 were included in this section: 8) whether the text assigned was a self-compiled or commercial text, 9) whether all the contents in the text were covered, 10) whether additional materials were used, and 11) whether the teachers assigned outside readings. Moreover, as far as the operationalized definitions are concerned, for the purpose of this section, *authentic materials* refer to language materials that are originally intended for native speakers, not L2 learners and *modified materials* are those taken from non-language learning sources and modified for language learning purposes.

The data shows that all participants stated that they used a self-compiled text and most of their materials were authentic materials. They reported having compiled many authentic materials because the authentic materials seemed to be interesting to the students. The typical text usually consisted of more pictures and graphic information compared to the text provided from the university. Teachers A and B, for example, stated that they selected the chapters from different authentic texts because unlike the texts provided from the faculty, the texts consisted of pictures and graphic information which



seemed interesting to the students. As for technical terms used in authentic materials, Teacher C admitted that using many different texts will facilitate the students in allowing them to recognize different terms of the same word.

It was found that no teachers interviewed used commercial texts. The texts used were self-compiled. Bits and pieces were excerpted from here and there. While one stated that there was not enough time to cover all the materials prepared, some said that they completed what they had set out to do. One who said that he completed the whole text stated that he only covered the main points without going into the details (Teacher F). This means that students are left to pick up the details on their own.

Regarding additional supplements, the element of which was asked in Question 10, all participants (N=6) indicated that they often came up with additional materials in their teaching. In such cases, then the materials were authentic. Some used online journals, extra clips from English language newspapers, articles from non-academic magazines, etc. Teacher D who preferred using online journals mentioned that such journals were beneficial because online articles were up-to-date and students could learn from various forms and styles of academic writing

In question 11, the participants were asked whether they assigned outside readings to their students. Four teachers stated that additional readings were requirements in their classes. Two only recommended that students do additional readings without assigning any particular text and asked that students look for reading material on their own (Teachers A and C). Teacher F bluntly stated that if the additional readings were not viewed as the class requirements, none of the students would read them on their own. As such, students were forced to read at least one assigned reading.

With the data discussed so far, one point is obvious. That is, there are different styles of teaching which are employed for teaching different skills of English. Materials used vary from teachers to teachers. Nevertheless, whatever the method used, there seems to be no guarantee that the objectives set will be reached. To know whether the time and energy invested yield expected result or not, some type of evaluation must be made to ensure that students' performances are up to the standard. This, in a way, will allow teachers to re-evaluate their teaching styles and make any necessary adjustments. The next section concentrates on evaluation.

## **Evaluation**

In this section, three questions were asked: 12) whether or not the participants themselves wrote the exam questions, 13) what the format of their exams looked like, and 14) whether or not the questions in the exams emphasized any particular skills.

According to the data, in answering Question 12, all participants (N=6) wrote the exam questions themselves. Teacher A adapted the exam questions from CU-TEP test (Chulalongkorn University Test of English Proficiency). He believed that the test was standardized and using it was much more convenient than writing a new test (of which the validity would have to be ascertained). Teachers D, E, and F, however, see the benefit of writing their own exams. They stated that their own questions met their objectives since they could base the questions on what had been taught.

As for the format of their exam questions, all participants used more essay questions and fill-in-blanks questions than the multiple choices and true/false questions. They found that using the essay format in their exams could, somehow, improve the



writing skills of their students. One participant (Teacher F) mentioned the advantage of essay exams, stating "...essay exams are a useful tool for finding out if my students can sort through a large body of information, figure out what is important, and explain why it is important". In the same vein, Teacher B argued that using essay exams could force the students to come up with the key ideas pursued in the class on their own and put them in their own words or to use interpretive or analytical skills practiced in the class. However, according to Teacher A, unseen questions were used when he wrote the exam questions, no matter how the word "unseen" is defined. Another participant (Teacher C) often wrote exams by using the essay format and fill-in-blanks. She also employed pre/post-tests in order to mature the student's development. Allowing students to use a dictionary in the examination is the style Teacher D used. He thought that using a dictionary when doing a test might help his students express their ideas clearly. Unlike the other participants, Teacher E did not focus on grammar when marking essay questions. What she expected was the content the students expressed especially when the objective of the course was fluent communication.

Question 14 was designed to elicit the answers from the participants concerning the objective of evaluation in specific skills. Three teachers (Teachers A, B, and D) evaluated the students' skills depending on the course objectives. For example, Teacher D said, "I didn't evaluate my students in all four skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading) in one particular course. It depends on what the course description requires." The rest of them (N=3) evaluated their students by emphasizing on all four skills. They argued that emphasizing all skills in the evaluation could be the beneficial method to improve the students' proficiency. Moreover, Teacher E mentioned that she emphasized four skills when she evaluated her students and this would help the students to communicate effectively.

As far as the evaluation is concerned, it concerns the measuring of students' achievement on the outcomes. However, as facilitators, teachers should take full responsibility to also closely monitor and possibly measure the development of the learners. As of now, no agreements have been reached on what the most effective tool may be when measuring the students' development. Should students be tested by the evaluation designed specifically for a particular course or by the evaluation has been designed to test the general skills of English? In fact, it is and has always been the teacher's decision on the format and the timing of evaluation. This is to say, one of the important factors that we should take into consideration when it comes to success in language teaching is teacher's belief. The next section then shifts the focus the participants' points of view toward EFL teaching in Thailand.

### **The points of views toward EFL teaching in Thailand**

In this section, the participants were asked four questions concerning their beliefs toward EFL teaching in the Thai context. Question 15 was used to elicit the participants' beliefs about the low English proficiency scores of Thai English learners. Two salient themes emerged from the interview data: 1) external factors of the learners such as the lack of natural environment in which English is used, insufficient input, and ineffective teaching styles; and 2) an internal factor, namely motivation. I begin with the external factors.



Four participants (Teachers A, B, D, and F) shared the same idea that their students could not achieve high proficiency scores because they lacked the opportunity to use English to communicate as their speech community-Thailand- does not require the use of English in everyday life. Teacher B, for example, mentioned that “In my opinion, Thai children are not in the environment that allows them to speak English and they don’t have the opportunity to use English to communicate with others...” Another external factor mentioned by the participants was the ineffective teaching style of English teachers in Thailand. Teacher C viewed that students should be taught by native-speaking teachers rather than by Thai teachers. To him, the beneficial aspects of learning English with native-speaking teachers are pronunciation, the native-like accent, and the listening skill. Teacher F supported that the English proficiency of students reflected the ineffective teaching styles, stating that using a communicative approach in a language classroom was one of the effective styles he used but was not very popular among most Thai teachers of English. He also argued that lacking sufficient input was the major problem he found with students with low English proficiency, no matter how “sufficient input” was defined.

As for the internal factor, motivation seems to be the key. Teacher C found that highly motivated students performed better than lowly motivated students. She accepted that motivation was the basic factor which facilitated the learning process and led to successful language learning.

As far as the age of second language learners are concerned, the participants were asked, “In your opinion, what is the most appropriate age for a child to acquire an additional language?” All (N=6) agreed that second language should be taught to L2 learners when they were children. Most of them stated that English should be taught at the age of 4 or 5. Teachers B, C, and D believed that L2 should be taught after a child knew the basic structure of L1. Teacher B, for instance, stated, “the appropriate period is when s/he has a certain degree of L1 knowledge and then let her/him learn a new language. I think it should be learnt at grade 4. S/he can compare the similarities and the differences between two languages and understand how they work.” The other participants (Teachers A, E, and F) stated that L2 should be taught to a child at the time when they were acquiring L1. They believed that, in terms of language acquisition, children could easily pick up any language since language was unconsciously learnt.

Another important point related to English language instruction which all participants were asked was whether English language should be effectively taught by Thai teachers or native speaking teachers. Three teachers (Teachers A, B, and F) believed that English should be taught to Thai students by both Thai and native speaking teachers. They asserted that writing and reading classes should be taught by Thai teachers since the lessons were complicated to students with low proficiency. However, speaking and listening skills should be trained by native speaking teachers. Teacher B stated, “Writing is no one’s first language. I think writing English should be taught by Thai teachers so that the students can get over the difficulties when communicating with teachers.” Teacher A supported that “...students should basically learn the language with Thai teachers but let the native speaking teachers play an important role when it comes to practicing the speaking and listening skills.”

Teacher C, on the other hand, viewed that the most effective method when it comes to acquiring a second language was learning it with a native speaking instructor. Unlike Teacher C, Teacher D argued that Thai students should learn English with Thai



teachers. He reasoned that “students should learn English with an efficient Thai teacher because a Thai teacher has the basic knowledge about the learners’ background and a Thai teacher can use Thai to explain complicated lessons” Only Teacher E believed that instructors were not an important factor successful second language acquisition. She stated that students, themselves, played the most important role when acquiring a second language. Teachers, be they Thai or native speakers of English, could not help them to if the students themselves were not highly motivated.

The last question, Question 18, asked whether English should be mandatory for Thai students. All participants (N=6) agreed and shared the same idea. Teacher A stated,

English should be mandatory for Thai students with no doubt, of course. English plays a crucial role in everyday life. In all fields, technology, education, and commercial, one cannot live without using English. The communicative English users can easily have access to all sources such as the Internet, text books, and any academic information.

Teacher D brought up an interesting idea about English as a basic skill for Thai students, stating that “I think English should be included in any course syllabus for any field of studies. In the next ten years, in Thailand, English will no longer be defined as a special skill but the basic skill which is considered the standard to all careers.”

While the teachers were experiencing different problems in teaching their respective courses to the students, they were trying hard to manage those problems with great care. This is because they must have realized the restrictions that they had to grapple with in their teaching careers, and at the same time they wanted to help students to learn English.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to ascertain opportunities and challenges in English instruction at a local teachers college in Thailand. The interviews conducted with the six participants revealed a wide range of challenges, ranging from low English proficiency to limited language input, impoverished classroom atmosphere and the college’s admission policy that was not conducive to successful L2 acquisition. However, it should be noted that despite these challenges, the participants managed to make the most of the limitations by, for example, employing individualized teaching techniques. In fact, a participant said that she needed to go back to the very basic, teaching her students rudimentary rules of grammar because her students needed help with them.

As far as limited vocabulary is concerned, another participant mentioned that asking students to memorize vocabulary items on a daily basis. While this practice might run counter to their college-level education, it turned out to be helping some of the low-ability students. In fact, this mundane problem with low English proficiency students may be beyond anyone’s understanding, it sufficiently portrayed the kind of problems that low-English ability students encounter. These challenges notwithstanding, opportunities arose for the participants to strive towards diverse teaching techniques that would help their students to do better, albeit not at the desired level.

All in all, the participants reflected on their teaching experiences with a view to figuring out the most optimal ways to solve English language learning problems encountered by the majority of their students. Indeed, the participants were trying hard to



turn those problems into manageable opportunities, for they were well aware of the fact that students entering a teachers college come equipped with little knowledge of English, but at the same time, they knew that it was their duty to help them become better at English, even if that means an uphill battle. Although this case study did not intend to generalize its findings to other situations, what has been reported in it provided a glimpse of opportunities and challenges that local English teachers could envision. This truly is not something trivial.

### About the Author

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## Appendix A

### *Pseudonym and Demographic Information of the Interviewees*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of teaching experience</b>	<b>Class taught</b>
1. Teacher A	Male	8	Academic Writing
2. Teacher B	Female	20	Business English
3. Teacher C	Female	2	English for Research
4. Teacher D	Male	11	Linguistics
5. Teacher E	Female	7	English for communication and study skill
6. Teacher F	Male	3	Grammar writing



## Appendix B

### *Summary of Questions in Relation to Each Domain*

<b>Q</b>	<b>Question Contents</b>	<b>Domain Related</b>
1	What are the main problems found in class?	Generic
2	How do you deal with such problems?	
3	If you could choose, what kind of students would you like to teach?	
4	Do you emphasize grammar teaching?	Pedagogy
5	Do you teach the pronunciation?	
6	Do you use the integrated approach?	
7	Which language has been used in teaching?	Teaching materials
8	Do you use your own book or commercial text?	
9	Did you teach all chapters?	
10	Do you have extra handouts/materials for your students?	
11	Were your students forced to read the extra reading?	Evaluation
12	Did you write the exam question yourself?	
13	What is your exam format?	
14	When evaluating your students, would you test them all skills?	Points of view toward EFL teaching in Thailand
15	Why do Thai children have low English proficiency score?	
16	When is the most appropriate period for a child to acquire an additional language?	
17	The effective English teacher should be Thai of native speaker?	
18	Should English be mandatory for Thai students?	