

# The Development of English Grammar Learning Skills by Using Explicit Teaching Method of University Students: The Case Study of Thai University Students

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## Abstract

In Thailand, the traditional teaching approach used for English language classes has been to explicitly teach English grammar, but in recent years the strategy has begun to shift towards the implicit teaching of language via communicative techniques. Within academic circles, there has been minimal agreement on the suitability of approaches used. Today, the question of whether it is better to use an implicit or explicit approach remains open to debate. In this study, an explicit approach is used to teach English grammar to learners in the English Program at the Faculty of Education, Lampang Rajabhat University. These learners have experienced implicit teaching during their own learning of English grammar, but upon graduation will have to use explicit methods when they become teachers of English grammar themselves. Initially, it can be observed that their knowledge of English grammar is weak. Also, they may lack the pedagogical skills to teach English grammar explicitly. The target group in this study was 74 Year 1 students. This study involved multiple steps, namely content analysis, a pre-test, explicit English grammar tutoring, a post-test and data analysis. Test results were statistically analysed for percentages, means and standard deviations. Pre- and post-test scores revealed a difference of 360, or 12.16%, with the mean of 4.87 (SD = 9.96). It can be seen that English grammar learning skills of the target group can be developed by using the explicit teaching method and this can support pre-service English teachers to teach grammar more effectively.

**Keywords:** English grammar, learning skills, explicit teaching method, implicit teaching method

## 1. Introduction

Thailand needs students who are capable in the use of the English language in order for the country to maintain its growth and economic success. Accordingly, institutions operating within the Thai education system have sought to improve the skills and knowledge of learners in the English language. The source of the significant problem in this study begins with a conflict between the Thai government's English language development policy and the English language learning context in Thailand. To clarify, English has been taught in Thailand at least since the time of King Rama III, who reigned from 1824 to 1851 (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana & Chinnawongs, 2002; Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005), when one of the key aims was to ensure that Thailand did not become a colony of one of the European powers (Prescott, 2007). Maintaining independence required that Thai people would need the ability to communicate effectively with western countries, and for this reason the education system took the necessary steps to include classes in English (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana & Chinnawongs, 2002).

Throughout Asia, different methods of English teaching have been tried, while in Thailand the two main approaches have been the traditional grammar approach, which was then followed by the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Teng & Sinwongsawat, 2015). The traditional approach had its roots in behaviourism and was widely employed in Thailand. It is based on the idea that language learning relies on memorization and force of habit (Celce-Murcia, 1991). It is vital to memorize grammar rules, and use repetition to form habits. In Thailand, traditional grammar approaches can be classified as an explicit approach (Prapphal, 2008 & Chang, 2011). That is, Thai learners have historically focused on the rules of grammar, beginning with

the basics and advancing through increasingly complex structures, while conducting practice drills to eliminate the type of errors which were thought to result from mother-tongue interference. Sentences were presented by teachers in the form of patterns, and the teachers would be expected to correct every single student mistake, since errors were perceived as bad habits (Chang, 2011).

However, these are contrast to the concept of implicit English grammar teaching method of the communicative language teaching approach. The latter concept holds that students who speak English as a first language can pick up the rules of grammar by using the language naturally in a real-life context rather than through classroom instruction in grammar. English can be used socially as a means of communicating, and it is not necessary to correct mistakes, since learners will be able to correct themselves as they become more proficient through using the language over time and encountering correct examples (Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1973; Wilkins, 1976; Widdowson, 1978; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Based on the concept of communicative language teaching approach as mentioned above, it seems to have dramatic influence on language teaching in Thailand and in East Asia resulting in all English traditional grammar instruction being excluded from the classrooms. As it is believed that studying tradition grammar did not facilitate language acquisition but instead encouraged learners to become more aware of the forms they use where a semantics-based syllabus was applied (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

The demise of the traditional grammar-based approach was accelerated by the Thai Ministry of Education who altered the national curriculum to promote communicative language teaching, with the objective of enhancing the ability of Thai people to communicate effectively in English (Kanoksilapatham, 2007). Unfortunately, it can be noted that the concept of the communicative language teaching approach is founded on a native speaker's judgement, learning the language as their mother tongue (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Consequently, the communicative approach through natural exposure might not be as effective for Thai students learning English in Thailand. These students may require additional support in grammar through classroom instruction (Biyae, 1997 & Dhanasobhon, 2006).

Some Thai parents use international school programs as a means to offer their offspring a chance to learn in an English-speaking environment, since this ensures they have a greater opportunity to use and develop their English than would be the case in a Thai school (Wongsothorn et al., 2002). It remains the case, however, that this course of action is restriction to those families who can afford such schools. For the bulk of the population, Thai schools provide very limited exposure to English in daily life.

There is a strong argument to support the use of comprehension as a teaching strategy, allowing second language learners to have a learning experience in the manner of those learning their first language (Celce-Murcia, 1991). The problem in Thailand, and many other parts of Asia, is that English is not spoken widely as a first language so learners cannot be immersed in a natural environment where English is used. The idea of self-correction of errors as learners are exposed to correct models of the language is not feasible in practice, and grammar must instead be taught explicitly in the classroom. In daily life, Thai students have very limited exposure to English, and the implicit study of grammar may be insufficient in building communicative effectiveness.

This author demonstrated in 2017 that Thai students taking the paper-based TOEFL exam during the period from 1991 to 2014 (see appendix) have scored rather poorly, indicating an inability for most learners to reach even the minimal levels of competence required for basic English communication for practical purposes. The scores confirm that English competence has not improved during the period under investigation, despite the changes to methodologies implemented by the Ministry of Education.

In the field of English teaching in Thailand, the question of whether to teach implicitly or explicitly remains a matter of significant importance. Bialystok (1994) defined explicit knowledge as that which is abstract, conscious, and analysed, whereas implicit knowledge was described as that which is intuitive and has not been analysed at all. It was recommended by Ellis (2008) that in an environment where English is not prevalent as a first language, second language English learners should undertake the explicit study of grammar, while further resources would be necessary to provide explicit instruction. However, in an environment where English is widely spoken as a first language, it is possible for learners to pick up grammar implicitly through exposure, and in the absence of explicit instruction.

Unfortunately, pre-service English teachers from Education Faculty, Lampang Rajabhat University, Thailand did not speak English as a first language. Their previous studies of English have exposed them to the implicit approach. For example, the target group in this study used to study English grammar in an unsystematic way. They studied specific English grammar structures that only appear in English conversations of each chapter of English books. This is in contrast to studying English in the era of traditional grammar, where grammar rules

were studied systematically from easy to difficult in an analytic manner. This may cause the target group to lack analytic English grammar competence which is an important qualification when they become English teachers after they graduate.

This study sought to examine the reasons for Thai pre-service English teachers encountering difficulties in using an explicit approach to teach English grammar. One possible reason is that the implicit approach through which these pre-service teachers had themselves learned English grammar might not provide an adequate foundation for them to teach English grammar explicitly during their practicum in various schools. Also, the study proposes potential strategies which might resolve the shortcomings in the pre-service teachers' English grammar skills.

Therefore, the researcher would like to develop English grammar learning skills for the first-year students who enrolled in the Fundamental English Grammar Course, Education Faculty, Lampang Rajabhat University by using the explicit instruction. This study acknowledges the important role of pre-service English teachers toward the development of Thai learners' English grammar. The quality of the teachers' English competence should be monitored in the initial stages or at the pre-service level, to be confident that they are able to teach English grammar competently to Thai learners.

## 2. Method

This section describes study design, study setting, target group, sampling procedure, and methodology including data collection and analysis procedures for the development of English grammar learning of the target group.

This study focused on the target group of 74 first year students enrolled for Semester 2 of Academic Year 2023, undertaking the 4-year English language program at the Faculty of Education at Lampang Rajabhat University in Thailand. The research is a single-group pre-post design study with a descriptive purpose as this study describes English grammar learning skills of the target group. Non-probability sampling, known as the purposive selection in quantitative research was used to select the target group. This is because the researcher works at the research site, facilitating access to students and approval for data collection by a senior colleague. It was believed that this study could benefit the target group.

The steps used to develop the English grammar learning skills of the target group in this study are outlined in the following details. The first step involved content analysis to determine the scope of the grammar topics. The English grammar course followed during this research involved content created for pre-service English teachers (English 155118) based on the 2023 curriculum of Lampang Rajabhat University. The content included the various parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, articles, and pronouns, as well as covering tenses. These topics matched the requirements in the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum which is followed by Thai primary schools. The course therefore prepares teachers to teach the grammar required in primary schools in Thailand.

Next, the pre-test involved the target group sitting a pre-test. All tests were commercially available and had been previously validated, including their item-object congruence, item difficulty, discriminating power and reliability which ensures that test items accurately assess the ability of test takers. The pre-test administered to 74 first year students contained 80 items and was calculated as a full score of 40 points. Each test set contained various grammar topics with four answer choices in each test item.

Next, tutoring the target group by using explicit teaching method on English grammar based on the topic of parts of speech for twelve weeks. To clarify, the target group studied English grammar through a step-by-step cumulative process. The target grammar structures were initially simple, and progressed to greater complexity. Various drills were used for practice. The researcher introduced the language to the target group in sentence-level patterns and corrected all students' language errors. After twelve weeks tutoring that post-test was conducted. A work flow of the methodology for the development of English grammar learning by using explicit teaching method is provided in Figure 1.

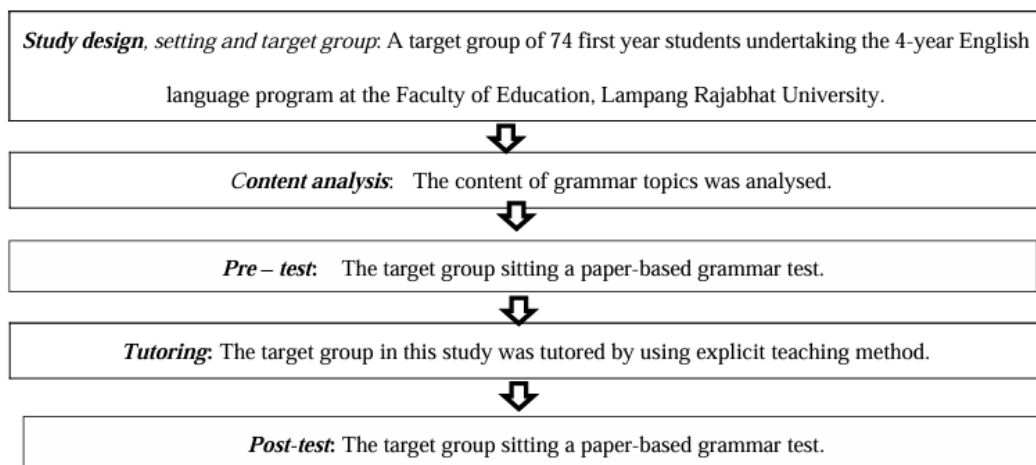


Figure 1. A work flow of the methodology for the development of English grammar learning

### 3. Results

The study participants took a pre-test and post-test which involved multiple steps, namely content analysis, a pre-test, tutoring, a post-test and data analysis. Once participants had completed the post-test, the researcher analysed the test results for percentages, means and standard deviations. The findings can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-test, post-test and difference scores of pre-test and post-test administered to the target group

	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference
Total	1159	1516	360
%	39.16	51.21	12.16
$\bar{x}$	15.66	20.49	4.87
SD	9.56	13.21	9.96

Table 1 presents the results of English grammar administered to the target group and differences between the pre-test score and post-test score. The total score for the pre-test was found to be 1159 or 39.16%, with a mean of 15.66 ( $SD = 9.56$ ), while the combined post-test score was 1516 or 51.21%, with a mean of 20.49 ( $SD = 13.21$ ). The pre- and post-test scores revealed a difference of 360 or 12.16%, with a mean difference of 4.87 ( $SD = 9.96$ ). These results are shown graphically in Figure 2.

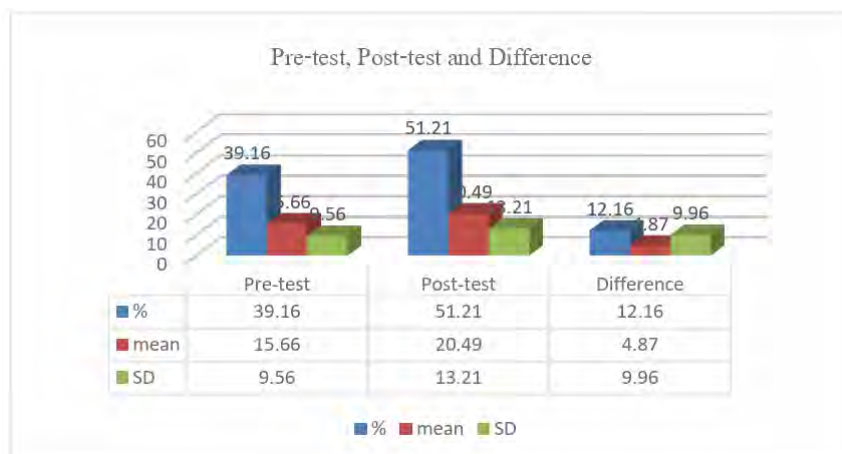


Figure 2. Pre-test, post-test and difference scores of English grammar tests administered to the target group

Based on the above bar graph, it can be seen that the  $SD$  for the difference in overall pre- and post-test scores measured 9.96 (more than 1). This is shown that the distribution of the answers selected by the target group was various and the total scores were affected. Importantly, it can be seen that the target group may have different

English grammar background knowledge. This can cause the scores received to be variously distributed. However, as English teachers to be, the English grammar competence of the target group should meet similar standards. For the purpose of this study, their English grammar learning skills should be developed by using explicit teaching methods so they will be better prepared to use such approaches to teach English grammar in the classroom.

Based on the results, it can be seen that post-test scores were higher than pre-test scores; thus, the study appeared to achieve its objective because students performed on test as expected. This can be concluded that English grammar learning skills of the target group in this study can be developed by using explicit teaching method. One important consideration in language learning in the Asian context is explained by Hu (2005b), who noted that the cultural perspective in East Asia and Thailand holds that step-by-step knowledge accumulation is a culturally appropriate pattern for study which also fits the explicit teaching methodology quite well. The findings in this current research provide confirmation of the need for pre-service English teachers in Thailand to learn grammar via an explicit approach.

#### 4. Discussion

This study principally sought to enhance the English grammar skills of Thai learners through an explicit approach. The learners come from Semester 2, Academic Year 2023, Year 1. The research used explicit teaching method to develop the English grammar learning skills of the target group. This is because it seems to have conflict between the Thai government's educational policies and the Thai English classroom context. To clarify, as mentioned previously, Thailand used explicit grammar instruction in the classroom prior to 1996 when the CLT approach was introduced. While grammar had been taught on a step-by-step basis from simple to more complex, learners failed to develop effective communicative skills, especially speaking. Accordingly, the Thai government took the view that a communicative approach might address this issue and boost communication where the grammar translation methods had been inadequate. This in fact became a trend throughout East Asia, as the CLT approach was embedded in curricula across the region to boost English language communication.

Thailand therefore made an official switch away from the traditional explicit approach to teaching grammar, and embraced the CLT alternative (Prapphal, 2008; Wongsothorn et al., 2002). It has not, however, been straightforward to introduce CLT in practice in Thailand, and the TOEFL scores achieved by Thai learners indicate a lack of English language learning progress despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education (Pianpadungporn, 2017).

This study sought to examine the reasons for Thai pre-service English teachers encountering difficulties in using an explicit approach to teach English grammar, despite the provision of a practicum. The target group in this study still lack professional knowledge and skills, and therefore might be unable to meet the requirements of the schools in which they will have to teach English. During the practicum, these pre-service English teachers must use an explicit approach, but in rural primary schools, a majority of the English teachers have minimal qualifications in the English language. Graham (2011) observed that in such schools, the teachers were very unlikely to have studied English as the key component of their university degree, or to have received training in English language teaching (Prapphal, 2008; Graham, 2011). In contrast, these pre-service teachers whose degree is in education are expected to be capable of providing explicit English grammar instruction during their practicum in primary schools. However, this is not the case, as the education degree fails to ensure that these pre-service teachers are familiar with and skilled in explicit teaching approaches for English grammar. This study therefore considers how this lack of competence in English grammar might be addressed.

In reviewing the work of Horwitz (1987), Hadjoannou and Hutchinson (2010), and Vibulphol (2004), two problems in improving the grammar skills of pre-service English teachers became apparent. The first concern was that such teachers have often learned grammar implicitly, and their content knowledge of the subject is inadequate. The second concern is that pedagogical skills with regard to grammar are lacking in these pre-service teachers, since they have never experienced the explicit teaching of grammar. Most of the pre-service teachers are familiar with CLT approaches from their own learning, and this formative experience then shapes their own attitudes about how to teach language and the methods they believe should be applied in the classroom. The question of whether pre-service teachers have beliefs about language learning which subsequently affect the teaching strategies they favour was investigated by Vibulphol (2004), who reported that pre-service teachers who had studied under teachers who used a CLT approach were more likely to prefer using a similar CLT approach themselves.

One recommendation which emerged in this study is that it is important to assess the English grammar levels of the pre-service teachers in the English Program at the Education Faculty at Lampang Rajabhat University during

the first year of their studies, since the abilities are diverse as the educational backgrounds of the pre-service teachers are equally diverse. Some learned in rural areas while others come from the cities, and the levels of English competence can be quite varied. The assessment could be used to ensure a minimum standard, and could allow the levels to be defined and the required grammar skills to be standardized. In the final year of their studies, prior to graduation, these pre-service teachers should undergo a second evaluation of their grammar skills in order to ensure that their knowledge is adequate for the task of delivering explicit grammar instruction in the primary education sector.

## 5. Conclusion

Earlier sections outline the study findings, which primarily indicate that the post-test scores exceed the pre-test scores, and accordingly the study appeared to achieve its objective. This can be concluded that English grammar learning skills of the target group in this study can be developed by using explicit teaching method. Thus, the English grammar curriculum for participants in this study could be reviewed to encompass explicit instruction about the rules of grammar, along with drills used to practice communication and time allocated to language practice. In countries where English is the native language, however, learners can pick up the language through natural exposure, so explicit teaching is no longer essential.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that the grammar approach is perceived to be suitable for learners who study where English is not a first language, as is the case throughout much of Asia, and certainly in Thailand. In addition, many Thai learners are thought to be rather passive, and unwilling to speak English confidently and freely. For such learners, a preference for grammar exercises is not unusual, as they are accustomed to receiving instruction rather than discovering language rules for themselves. In such a context, the traditional grammar approach might be quite suitable. Furthermore, grammar is a crucial aspect of the English language, and if it is not understood well, communication becomes rather complicated. Furthermore, the rigorous methodology employed in this work, including content and test item analysis, may have supported the development of English grammar learning skills which is useful for the participants in this study.

It is also important to consider which approach should be primarily applied for teaching English in schools across Thailand. Since many countries around the world are now introducing integrative holistic teaching methodologies, this is something which Thailand should investigate in greater depth, with the potential next step of adopting and adapting such approaches to fit the Thai cultural environment.

This matter might be solved if pre-service teachers were given the opportunity to experience explicit grammar teaching in the classroom from the learner's perspective for themselves. Such experience might enhance their knowledge of English grammar and develop their pedagogical skills. For the EFL classroom in Thailand, it may be effective to combine the CLT approach with explicit instruction in grammar to achieve the best results overall.

Finally, the participants in this research were invited to express their views on the explicit teaching approach following completion of the post-test. Many explained that they were unable to remember some of the rules of English grammar, while some added that although the test was not difficult, it was hard to remember all of the grammar rules, especially when they did not have the chance to practice English in their daily lives, which is a natural consequence of English not being a first language in Thailand. These comments helped to confirm the idea that language teaching can best be supported by natural exposure to the language, and were in agreement with the findings of Biyaem (1997) and Wiriyachitra (2002) who studied English language learning in the Thai context. Accordingly, if the goal of the Thai Education Ministry is to improve the English fluency of the Thai public, it will be helpful to offer explicit classroom instruction in English grammar. A review of the English Grammar Curriculum for pre-service teachers in the English Program at the Education Faculty at Lampang Rajabhat University would therefore be useful in order to ensure that explicit teaching of grammar rules is included, while practice hours are provided for supportive communication drills.

Thailand's Ministry of Education mandated a shift from the traditional grammar-based approach to a CLT approach in 1996, with the aim of improving the English communication skills of the Thai people. This study provides evidence that those aims were not achieved despite the implementation of the CLT strategy.

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#### **Competing interests**

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Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

#### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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### Appendix

#### TOEFL average score summary of Thailand from 1991-2014

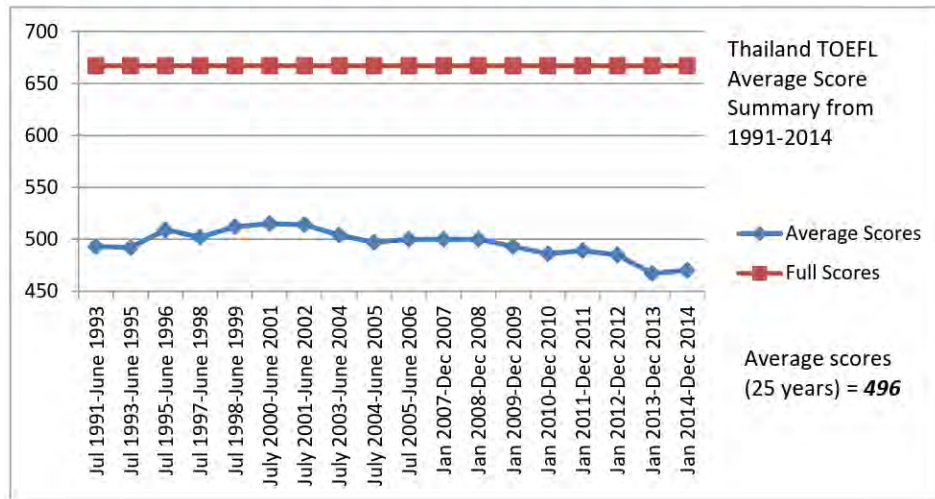


Figure 3. Presents TOEFL average score summary of Thailand from 1991-2014 (Pianpadungporn, 2017)