

The Wider Social Context of School and Thai EFL University Learners

Sureepong Phothongsunan

Department of Business English,
School of Arts, Assumption University of Thailand

Abstract

The objectives of this study are to investigate a group of 14 Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' views on their learning context outside the classroom and the extent to which it has an influence on their English learning in their tertiary education. From the language classroom comes further the wider social context of university in which EFL students learn outside the formal learning environment in relation to the opportunities to use and to be exposed to the target language. Two data collection methods are employed: questionnaires and interviews. It is revealed that the students perceive that the wider social context indeed influences their learning experiences outside as well as in the language classroom in two major aspects: self-development in English use and drawing on English as a common means of communication or a lingua franca (ELF) whereby there is an implicit search for similarities through English. Many further report that the specific university culture and its environment play a great role in their English learning, motivating or demotivating them to use English for communication. Implications from the study can be made to Thai EFL universities to focus on the stance on English and their efforts to make the school environment more conducive to English use and learning.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL) English as a lingua franca (ELF), school Culture, social context, university learners

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Introduction

The wider school context is a social context in which informal opportunities could be available to learners for language use and learning. With these informal opportunities, the researcher believes that learners can engage in genuine and meaningful interaction with different people, teachers and peers alike, in their daily activities in a school or university setting. In the process, they can be exposed, for example, to a wide variety of language systems in use such as vocabulary and language structures. These informal opportunities, nonetheless, depend on the school's organisation and setting. These relate to the institution's rationale, priorities and goals which can create opportunities where foreign language learners are able to develop their language within the school environment (Spolsky, 1989). In this instance, the wider social context outside the classroom may also constitute a power incentive or/and disincentive for further learning (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). In the case of Thailand, this is an important issue because schools and universities are on the whole encouraged to promote the use of English outside the formal classroom as a means of supporting classroom learning.

To begin with, some background information on a university environment where this research was conducted is needed. The university represents an international community of students and teachers where English is used as a medium of instruction across all subjects. For the researcher, this context is thus considered unique and worth studying. Understanding how the wider school context could impact the way English is learned and perceived means that it would help to see how the learners could engage in their learning context outside the classroom to improve their English language use.

The issue of school culture and English learning in Thailand needs addressing. In fact, studies have shown that the social climate of a school can influence the variety of student outcomes from social-emotional functioning and behaviour to grades and educational performance (Cook et al. 2000). A caring and positive school climate has been shown to foster attachment to school or university, which in sequence promotes learning. To understand the learners' wider school experiences, it is important that these areas or issues be discussed. Generally, universities in Thailand have different orientations towards English learning. These could relate to university culture and, in particular, university leadership, such as whether the university administrators are in favour of promoting English use within the wider social context of university. This is because university culture includes the professional culture of educators, standards of local organisation and administrative practice (Husén & Postlethwaite, 1994). Thus, the way universities at large perceive English learning could also account for the way English can be used by learners within such environments. If English learning is well-taken for examination purposes, universities may concentrate on classroom learning where the focus is on learners' passing the examinations. In this case, contexts outside the classroom would seem insignificant to developing learners' proficiency in English. This relates to the notion presented by Spolsky (1989) that school or university rationale, priorities and goals for the target language are vital as they seem to determine whether learners can use English outside the language classroom either to practise or to continue learning the target language.

Two main research questions in the study are:

1. What are the perceptions of Thai EFL university learners of their learning context outside the classroom at university?
2. How does the wider university context help the learners improve their English?

Literature Review

Universities both public and private are set up for the purpose of providing a controlled and supportive learning environment with educational facilities for learners to excel academically and in co-curricular activities. In other words, university students are to be provided with different learning experiences so that they can enhance their potentiality to develop academically and socially. For English learning, an environment where learners are afforded a range of English learning experiences where they can use and be exposed to the language in the classroom as well as outside the classroom is therefore necessary (Malmkjær & Williams, 1998).

By and large universities have different orientations towards the learning of English. Some universities' rationale for English learning seems to be confined to examinations (Ewell, 2004). It would appear that if a university focused on English learning in terms of examinations, learners would have a different conception of learning English since they would prioritize studying English to pass examinations rather than learning English outside the classroom for true communicative purposes. On the contrary, if a university intended to be an English speaking community and had a policy to ensure that English is a dominant subject in university, English would be viewed as a language that would benefit learners in many different ways at present and in the future. English, this way, is perceived as an integral and necessary part of the administration, curriculum and social practices of the school (Corson, 1990).

Support for English learning at university

It can be said that all universities in Thailand provide support for learning English outside of the classroom. These university support programmes normally range from formal to relatively informal activities involving learners from different forms (Bakhurst, 2009). Such programmes seem to involve all university students despite their English language proficiency. Some promote highly proficient English language learners as peer role models for low proficient learners through different activities where efforts are made to establish a community of practice where less able English learners could learn from the more able ones. There have been universities providing facilities such as a radio station where learners can be exposed to English through radio broadcasts and some provide access to television and movie shows in English for learners which could be through an on-site viewing facility or movie rental service.

In addition to facilities, these seems to be other forms of informal support for English learning at school such as an English club run by students, a toastmaster or debate club to enhance public speaking skills and so on. On top of that, activities and programs supporting and encouraging easy-going English learning are arranged relatively by universities (Coffield, 2000).

It would be rational to argue that differences in students' attitudes would arise if some universities have specific policy or strategies to improve students' English proficiency while some do not. Clearly, universities with specific policy where different programmes are drawn to focus

on different aspects of learners' language development would focus on learners' affective dimension as well so that students could be reassured about using English confidently within the university environment without feeling awkward or reluctant.

Learners and English: Opportunities to use and to be exposed to the language

To understand learners' social experiences with English within the wider social context of school, learners' perceptions of their friends, teachers and administrators in light of the university culture and English learning as a basis for understanding their experiences in context are to be investigated (Van Marsenille, 2015). In certain university culture, students may find speaking English difficult for fear of incorrectness. Thus, learners' views about the university community's use of English could account for the difficulty or simplicity they find in speaking English.

What appears to be most influential when it comes to the wider university context is the way university administrators manage learning in university and set an example by using the language evidently which could influence how the whole school approaches the issue of learning the English language (Parr, 2014). These insights seem to indicate that strong leadership and models are important in universities in Thailand.

Further insights into the learners' experiences with English can be offered through informal school practice which refers to the learners' perceptions of and responses to various school initiatives and efforts to extend their use and learning of English outside the classroom (Van Marsenille, 2015). This implies where there are opportunities for students to use and to learn English through informal support activities provided or supported by universities. Opportunities to use English are up to learners as well because if they do not feel that they need to improve or emerge themselves in English, these activities would not be of their interest which relates to how learners feel about themselves in terms of seeing themselves as active users of English and also probably in using the language accurately. Another issue related to learners' using English might be linked to the purpose of speaking the language itself if there is a valid purpose to use it.

Teachers' willingness or reluctance to use English outside of the classroom will be discussed next. It can be said that students do not use English perhaps because teachers do not want to use it. Using English involves power relations (Norton, 2000). Unless teachers realise that they hold power to influence learners to speak or use English, learners would not have a fine opportunity to practically use English. As long as EFL teachers are supportive of their learners using English in the wider context of university, it more or less reflects the university' attitude towards English. This applies both to formal and informal contexts of learning. From another perspective, teachers' lack of enthusiasm to use English outside of the classroom appears to highlight the indecisive role of English in an EFL context. While English is considered a very important foreign language today, not all the teachers particularly non-native non-English subject teachers believe in the importance of using English socially outside of class (Eskildsen & Theodórsdóttir, 2017).

Equally important is an issue related to peer culture, accounting for the learners' perceptions of the extent to which their social interactions with different peers outside the formal learning environment influence their use and learning of English. On one level, there could be an

issue of identity amongst second language (L2) learners where speaking English could be seen as a sign of diverging from their native-language peer group. In which case, there appears to be peer pressure that can reduce learners' desire to speak English. Peer social interactions in fact have been found to impact student performance in many ways (Smith & Brain, 2000). One possible reason is that speaking English involves strong emotional commitment on the part of learners. Unless learners have a positive image of themselves, it would be difficult for them to make an effort to communicate orally in English. On another level, learners may have a different value for English learning dependent upon the extent to which universities put an emphasis on examinations or speaking English or both.

When English is perceived as a part of the general culture at university, there would be a need to try to use the language. In this case, interaction with other peers who use the language conduces to learning English. According to van Lier's (1996), second language learners can also develop their language through collaborating and interacting with second language speakers of different proficiency levels. Here the notion of learning a language as a social and collaborative activity seems evident. Through their interaction with more capable peers, they can see how they can become better English language learners who can develop their own capabilities in English. From one perspective, this seems to be manifested through a university effort to promote good English language learners as peer role models for other learners at university.

As previously reviewed, learners' experiences within the wider social context of university in relation to the opportunities to use and to be exposed to English are related to whether learners can use English with their teachers, the extent they can use the language in university activities arranged specifically for English and also, whether within their small peer culture, there is a chance for them to use the language.

Methodology

Using a case study, this research looks into a social inquiry on the meanings and values of acting persons, in this case, EFL students, and therefore on their subjective, complex action (Crotty, 2000). Thus, to consider an interpretation of a sequence of events to be adequate and meaningful on the basis of past experience, there is a need to isolate individual phenomena, the wider context of learning at university, to trace learners' unique development in the area of investigation.

Sampling

The students who took part in this study represent a group of 14 Thai undergraduates studying in the School of Arts in a private university in Thailand. They were in their third and fourth years of study in a four-year degree program. Five participants were male and the nine others were female. Purposively selected, they were asked to participate in the study based on the fact that they had been studying in this university for at least three years and would have sufficiently been exposed to the university ambience, facilities and services, as well as administration regarding English use policy and directives. They had all passed English IV, the last and most difficult of the four compulsory English courses at the university. Their GPA fell in a range between 2.53 to 3.32 out of a four point scale, which is considered largely satisfactory in terms of academic performance. None of them had studied abroad.

Data collection

In collecting data from the sample group, two instruments were employed. A questionnaire survey was initially developed. It is a method to collect the data and it can help form the questions and receive the responses without having to talk with the participants (Walliman, 2018). A questionnaire is used very often in gathering information about people's beliefs, attitudes, and values (Sommer & Sommer, 2002). Therefore, the questionnaire is one effective way to investigate Thai EFL learners' views of their university learning context which serves as the main theoretical framework of this study. A 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire with ten questions was used to guide and evaluate the level of the participants' views. The reasons why the questionnaire was used in collecting data are that a questionnaire is an effective way expected to yield the learners' views towards the subject of the current study (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Second, the survey instrument helps provide the main grounds to construct the semi-structured interview questions. Third, with a survey questionnaire, the data collection process takes a short period of time. In this study, the Thai version of the questionnaire, translated from English, was employed to avoid problems with the participants' misunderstanding the language when completing the questionnaire.

Afterwards, semi-structured interviews with six participants were employed to obtain additional insights into the participants' views towards their Thai university context and how they perceived their context to be conducive to their English learning development. These six interviewees were purposively selected according to their varying points from the questionnaire responses, grouped into three levels: high, medium and low. The questions used in the interviews were meant to crosscheck the results from the questionnaire and to probe further to seek the participants' views about their context in-depth. An interview is considered an outstanding means to discover complicated beliefs, thoughts, feelings and attitude (Baxter, & Babbie, 2004). Additionally, an interview is often seen as the most regular and special methods to discover individual's life experience.

The interviews were conducted in Thai and lasted about 20 minutes each session. All the interview sessions were audio-recorded with permission from the participants. Each interview was then transcribed into English for data analysis. To verify the accuracy and reliability of the scripts, the researcher had the help of a student assistant as inter-rater in double-checking all the transcriptions at random.

Data analysis

Initially, the quantitative data analysis was completed and then the follow-up interview questions were derived based on the questionnaire results. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. First, the quantitative data analysis was conducted using PASW statistics 18. The main descriptive statistics of frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation (SD) were computed using the rating scores of the participants' views.

The semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate learners' views on the importance of their university context and the extent to which it helps them with their English learning. The interviews were recorded and the audio-recording transcribed. The qualitative data analysis used is thematic strategies and coding categories according to the pre-determined themes

and emerging themes from the data. These emerging themes were later included according to the prominent categories.

As this is a mixed method study, the data analysis consists of the combination of both statistical and thematic data analytic techniques (Teddlie, & Tashakkori, 2009). In this case, the data was analyzed back and forth for both statistical and thematic analysis. Moreover, according to Sommer and Sommer (2002), it is deemed rational to use more than one method to analyze data or probe for additional data if detailed responses are needed for research.

Findings and Discussion

To answer the first research question, two important findings can be pointed out: university culture and the university physical environments in which English learning occurs.

In relation to university culture, all participants reported that their university context is unique and unlike other contexts as English is used in their context as a medium of instruction and as an international language for learning in class and outside. They also strongly indicated that they have to use English at all time to communicate with non-Thai lecturers and classmates outside of the classroom though they can use Thai with Thai lecturers. Many of the participants found that their university context supports their English skill development especially for their speaking and listening to the degree that they can use English for communication with confidence and without being seen as showing off their English skills. In addition, the participants greatly concurred that not they do not feel embarrassed in engaging in English conversations with peers and instructors outside the classroom ($M= 4.70$).

Most of the participants also had a very positive overall impression on the university physical milieu ($M=4.52$), justifying that the university has emphasized using only English in signposts around campus and announcements made both in spoken and written forms, including in social media presence such as Facebook and the university's website. Many interviewees ($N=5$) added that they hardly see any sign in Thai, making the university ideal for learning English as students would be exposed to English as much as possible.

The participants perceived that they can efficiently improve their English proficiency in the university context ($M=4.48$), leading to their self-development in English, the process by which their English abilities are gradually developed. Five of the participants have also stressed the value of their university courses, their engagement with peers and lecturers for self-improvement.

In response to the second research question, the extent to which the wider university context can help the learners improve their English, it was found that the said university context is seen as an ELF context ($M= 4.58$) where English is used as a lingua franca, or a common means of communication or contact language for speakers of different native languages, in this case for the students whose native language is Thai. From the participants' general perceptions, English is seen as a necessity to be learned and used as a way to create commonality and similarities among the university students and lecturers from different countries and backgrounds even though native-like competency of speakers from Inner Circle countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia is satisfactory if possible. All of the interviewees ($N=6$) reported that this context is totally different

from their real life environment. According to them, they hardly use English at all outside the context when they are back home or hang out with their Thai friends even though having foreign friends or classmates is an exception. Two added that using English outside of the university makes them feel uncomfortable and alienated and that is why they would avoid using English if possible.

In addition, the university's continuous effort in promoting the use of English in the wider context of the university is perceived favorably by the participants as well ($M=4.32$). It was found that it is a university rule that Thai is not to be used in student academic advising where the students have to meet with their advisor every semester to discuss their academic progress and personal problems. During the academic advising session held in their advisors' offices, the students have to use English to make themselves understood.

The students identified this context as helping them to improve their English for their lifelong learning ($M=4.35$). Five of the participants being interviewed explained that learning English is a slow process and it takes time to master. This context thus "teaches me to like learning English little by little as it something I have to use and get used to" said one interviewee. It was also revealed by two participants that the wider university context helps build their character and attribute as proficient and assertive users of English.

From the findings, the university context under investigation has a unique culture and environment where English is strongly emphasized. The salient use of signposts and signals in English is related to the notion of linguistic landscape which is the visibility and notice of languages on public and commercial signs in a given area or region (Landry & Bourhis 1997). The languages used in public signs indicate what languages are locally relevant (Kasanga, 2012). Linguistic landscape signs actually describe the identity of a certain context and almost represent the language of its inhabitants at a moment in time. In case of the current study, this shows the collective identity of the context as English is a more dominant language than the students' own native language, Thai. Corresponding to this, it can be said that the move to using English in higher education globally as the most significant current trend in internationalization is prevalent in this context. The use of English as a medium of instruction in all its undergraduate programs has played an important role in internationalization of the education itself. According to Huang (2006), internationalization is becoming one of the most important and increasingly complex factors of higher education. In fact, higher education institutions in all regions of the world are addressing the international dimension of higher education in a way that reflects their values, priorities, opportunities and available resources. Nonetheless, one salient benefit and recent trend of internationalizing programs where English is used is to attract international students from all around the world.

The issue of self-development in English proficiency arises among a number of participants in this study. The effects of English language proficiency on adjustment to university life are reported in Andrade (2009)'s study. Her study examined how English language proficiency affected academic and social adjustment, identified types of support, and considered the effects of English proficiency on intercultural learning. It was found that students were generally satisfied with their English proficiency, appreciated learning English in the EMI (English as a medium of instruction) context, and felt their English was improved through course work and social

interaction in and outside the classroom. It was also revealed that intercultural interaction aided English development and intercultural growth. The findings by Andrade (2009) resemble what this study has found in terms of how students' self-perceived English proficiency is positive and encouraging in the context of learning with heavy exposure to English through social interaction or engagement with others.

As the majority of the students perceived that the university context in question is an ELF context, it seems that nothing is wrong in keeping features of the students' first language (L1) including their accent. To the students in this study, English as a lingua franca would be a contact language among its users of the language, regardless of where they are from or whether or not they are native English speakers or even in the event of their sharing the same native Thai language. According to Jenkins (2007), ELF is oriented to the norms of mutual negotiation involving efforts and adjustments from all concerned parties. As a result, English is not a single variety but actually differs from one territory to another. Therefore, Asian English or even Thai English is not an issue, which relates to what most of the participants regarded. What matters more is to consider the needs of the students who are learning English to mainly communicate with other non-native speakers. In this situation, English is used as a common and shared language between the people who use it. Thus, the students' needs in this context would be quite different from students who want to study in the UK or USA to integrate within that culture and may want to sound as much like a native English speaker. The significance for students using ELF, on the other hand, is to be as intelligible as possible to the people they intend to communicate with. By creating intelligibility using English, the EFL students could find and retain unity and resemblances both among themselves and their teachers, most of whom are non-native speakers of English.

Conclusion

Employing a mixed method approach in exploring the Thai EFL university learners' views on the ways in which they perceive their wider university context and how the university context helps to advance their English, this study, shed light on the significance of the milieu outside of the classroom particularly in a distinct English laden university context in an EFL country where English is generally not a local medium of communication. Findings from this study show that the university context under study impinges on the students' English learning experiences in terms of supporting their self-development in English and identifying English as a regular means of communication to create cohesion. The specific university culture and its ambience also come into play given the use of English for communication in this context. The findings would be useful for other Thai EFL universities to recognize the role that university contexts play in encouraging English learning and exposing EFL learners to English extensively. Research in the future with different groups of EFL students in various conditions are worthy of investigation. These can provide EFL and ESL educators with valued insights into how much learners' association with English within the wider social context is dictated by university practices and culture. Also, further research involving learners' views on issues of teaching and learning of English in relation to the opportunities to use and to be exposed to English through activities arranged by university should be considered.

About the Author:

Sureepong Phothongsunan works at the Theodore Maria School of Arts, Assumption University, Thailand. Holding a doctorate in TEFL from the University of Exeter, UK, he has published books, articles, and research in English Language Teaching and English for Specific Purposes. Orchid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8115-4375>

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