The Effects of Using Target Language Strategy on Improving EFL Undergraduate Students' English proficiency
ผลของการใช้กลยุทธ์ภาษาเป้าหมายต่อการพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษ ของนักศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาในบริบทที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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บทคัดย่อ

วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัยนี้ เพื่อเปรียบเทียบผลการใช้กลยุทธ์การสอนภาษา ที่แตกต่างกันระหว่างกลยุทธ์การใช้ภาษาเป้าหมาย (อังกฤษ) และกลยุทธ์ภาษาที่ 1 ของผู้เรียน (ไทย) ในการสอน เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาระดับ อุดมศึกษา และศึกษาปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อการเรียนรู้ของผู้เรียน เมื่อมีการใช้กลยุทธ์ ภาษาเป้าหมายในชั้นเรียน กลุ่มตัวอย่าง ประกอบด้วย นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 4 จาก มหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในจังหวัดยะลา จำนวน 40 คน แบ่งออกเป็น 2 กลุ่ม ได้แก่ กลุ่มทดลอง และกลุ่มควบคุม กลุ่มละ 20 คน กลุ่มทดลองได้รับการสอนโดยการใช้กลยุทธ์ ภาษาเป้าหมาย กลุ่มควบคุมได้รับการสอนโดยการใช้กลยุทธ์ภาษาที่ 1 ของผู้เรียน เครื่องมือวิจัยที่ใช้ได้แก่ แบบทดสอบก่อน และหลังเรียน และแบบสัมภาษณ์ กึ่งโครงสร้าง ข้อมูลวิจัยได้รับการวิเคราะห์ และอธิบายในรูปแบบบรรยาย

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ผลการศึกษา พบความแตกต่างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ระดับ 0.01 ค่าเฉลี่ยของแบบทดสอบหลังเรียนของกลุ่มทดลอง ($\overline{X}$=19.35, SD=3.11) สูงกว่ากลุ่มควบคุม ($\overline{X}$=16.22, SD=1.73) และผลการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากแบบสัมภาษณ์เกี่ยวกับปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อการเรียนรู้ของผู้เรียนพบว่า สื่อการเรียนการสอน กิจกรรมการจัดการเรียน และวัจนและอวัจนภาษาของผู้สอน เป็นปัจจัยสำคัญที่ส่งเสริมการเรียนรู้ในการเรียนโดยการใช้กลยุทธ์ภาษาเป้าหมาย อย่างไรก็ตาม พบปัจจัยที่เป็นอุปสรรคเช่นเดียวกัน ได้แก่ ระยะเวลาที่ใช้ในการสอน สื่อเทคโนโลยี และความสามารถด้านภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียน ผลของการวิจัยสรุปได้ว่าการเรียนโดยการใช้กลยุทธ์ภาษาเป้าหมายสามารถพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาในบริบทที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศได้ โดยพิจารณาปัจจัยต่าง ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องอย่างรอบคอบ

คำสำคัญ : กลยุทธ์ภาษาเป้าหมาย, กลยุทธ์ภาษาที่ 1 ของผู้เรียน, บริบทที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

Abstract

The current study aims to compare the effects of using two different teaching strategies, target language (English) and student's first language (Thai) strategy on teaching to improve undergraduate students' English skills and to investigate factors affecting their learning when learning through target language strategy. The participants of this study were 40 undergraduate students at a university in Yala. They were divided into an experimental group and a controlled group, 20 participants each. The experimental group received target language strategy while the controlled group received students' first language strategy. The research instruments included pretest and posttests and semi-structured interview. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive analysis.

The findings revealed that there was statistically significant difference at the level of 0.01. The mean scores of the posttests of the experimental group ($\overline{X}$=19.35, SD=3.11) was higher than the controlled group ($\overline{X}$=16.22, SD=1.73).

In other words, the target language group outperformed the students' first language group. The data analysis from semi-structured interview asking about factors affecting students learning revealed that instructional medias, teaching activities and verbal and non-verbal language used by the teacher were as key supporting factors in learning through target language strategy. However, obstructing factors were also found including time allocation, technology medias, and learners' English deficiency. The findings of this study can be concluded that the implementation of first language strategy can improve EFL undergraduate students' English proficiency with careful considerations of involving factors.

Keywords : Target language strategy, Students' first language strategy, EFL context

Introduction

English is considered one of the most important languages as it is a major language used in a wide range of professions. Therefore, English becomes one of the most studied languages in the world (Dearden, 2014). In Thailand, English is a major international language taught in every level all over the country for decades (Wiriyachitra, 2002). Thailand is considered one of the first nations that involved English language in education in this region and English had been generated as fundamental course in core curriculum (2008) which generated that every learner must learn English while other languages are just optional (Sanglir & Modehiran, 2017). As well as curriculum generating that after learners archived their primary level, they should gain at least communication skill, speaking skill in accordance with themselves, family, school, environment, food, beverages and daily experiences (Sanglir & Modehiran, 2017). While secondary level, the aims are that providing learners positive perceptions toward international languages and learners are able to communicate about their own experiences and knowledge according to professions and further their education in higher level (Office of the Basic Education Commission,

Ministry of Education, 2551). Surprisingly, the evidences according to Education First's 2019 English Proficiency Index Report showed that Thailand ranked 74th out of 100 countries rated, dropping into the "Low Proficiency" group. In addition, it was found that Thai students are less proficient in English compared to other ASEAN member countries (Choomthong, 2014).

There have been attempts to create and apply teaching methods and strategies by whom it may concern in teaching English in classes for decades for the fully benefits of the learners. Though, multiple teaching methods have been utilized to teach English in Thailand, for instance, Grammar-Translation Method, The Direct Method, Communicative Language Teaching Approach and Collaborative Teaching Approach (Tieocharoen & Rimkeeratikul, 2019), some teaching methods and strategies applied seem inappropriate for EFL context, especially, Thailand. Therefore, teaching English has been developed in order to find the most effective method to improve learners' English proficiency. One of the interesting strategies for improving learners' English proficiency, especially speaking and listening is target language strategy or learner's L2. However, there are various factors affecting the learners when implementing this strategy. One of those is the teacher (Geringer, 2003), therefore, when the teacher uses target language, he or she is required to be able to use target language efficiently.

Krashen (1982) stated that an effective language teacher should be able to use target language effectively or use target language as much as possible, especially in the context of EFL because the learners of this context have less opportunity to expose and they use it only in the classroom. So, the teachers should seize this opportunity to use target language in order to build English learning environment that helps establish and maintain rapport between teacher and students, builds motivation and confidence among the learners, and facilitates the processes of teaching and learning concretely (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002).

Target language or English is widely used in ESL context but rarely used in EFL context such as Thailand. Possibly, the difference of the contexts including the teachers' and learners' English proficiency. In ESL context, English proficiency of the teachers and learners are better comparing to EFL context (Krashen, 1982). Though, it should be necessary to use target language in both contexts, since it makes the learners mainly use target language in communication. According to linguistic, natural way of learning a language of a child is to learn through experience and surrounding. Thus, the teachers should use target language as much as possible.

Using target language for communication in a classroom helps to fulfill the need of the learners (Littlewood & Yu, 2009). For the teachers, avoid using student's mother tongue in a classroom in order to increase a quality of learning as well (Phillipson, 1992). Using target language in a class is another factor directly affecting the learners. Frequency use of target language depending on the teacher's perception. The concept of using target language can be divided into 2. Firstly, monolingual approach; believing that the learners can learn well when they learn through natural way and they will create target language as many as they receive the language and surrounding provided by the teachers (Polio & Duff, 1990; Turnbull, 2001), and secondly, Bilingual approach; this concept believes that using learners' mother tongue in a classroom is appeared naturally as well as communication made by communicators using different languages and using learner's mother tongue does not negatively affect their language learning if the teacher uses it properly (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2001).

Building a positive learning environment using target language in a classroom, apart from a teacher, learners play an important role as well. The learners' attitudes toward target language and the use of target language by the teacher becoming an important factor affecting their motivation in learning English because attitude is related to motivation as it supports learners' learning

goals (Gardner, 1985). When a teacher prefers to use target language strategy to teach English, he needs to realize learning environment in a classroom and makes sure that learners are involved in their own learning by using target language properly without complication to helps learners understand. In additions, using instructional medias appropriately for learners' positive attitude leading to a set goal of language learning.

In a class, learners do not use English as their first language and they are not inspired to use target language or English. However, as previous studies in accordance with EFL context revealing that learners could not use only their second language but they still need their first language or mother tongue to respond among them (Mahmoudi & Amirkhiz, 2011; Carson & Kashihara, 2012). Vygotsky (1986) stated that social interaction of learners is mediation in developing knowledge. Thus, for the classroom context, more interaction leads to more effective language acquisition whether the interactions are made between learners and learners or learners and a teacher. However, learners' mother tongue can engage their interest of the content learned. If the learners' English proficiency are different, they are required to be supported by learning in a small group. Previous studies suggested that using target language while communicating in a class stimulates the leaning and builds knowledge between others (Antón & DiCamilla, 1999). Increasing to use target language of a teacher is necessary for learners and using students' first language or students' L1 makes a class uninteresting and they feel that they do not take parts in their own learning (MacDonald, 1993).

Thus, this study aimed to investigate the effects of using target language or English as the medium of instruction on improving EFL undergraduate students' English proficiency and study factors (Supporting and obstructing) affecting students' learning.

Research objectives

1. To investigate the effects of target language (English) teaching strategy on improving EFL undergraduate students' English proficiency.

2. To investigate factors (supporting and obstructing) affecting EFL undergraduate students learning through target language strategy.

Research questions

1. Are there any differences between EFL undergraduate students' English ability in target language group and students' L1 group. If yes, what are they?

2. What factors (supporting and obstructing) affecting EFL undergraduate students' learning through target language on improving EFL undergraduate students' English proficiency?

Research hypothesis

1. The participants in target language group outperformed the students' L1 group.

2. There are supporting and obstructing factors found in target language group.

Research methodology

1. participants

This research is a quasi-experimental study including one experimental group and one controlled group. The participants were forty undergraduate students in two intact classes from a faculty of Education, majoring Health Education and Special Education at a university in Yala province. One intact class of 20 participants were randomly assigned into an experimental group learning through target language strategy and the other intact group of 20 participants were assigned into a controlled group learning through students' first language or Thai.

2. Research instruments

2.1 Teaching handouts

Teaching handouts given to both groups of participants, the experimental group and the controlled group were similar including the handouts according to listening, conversation, reading and grammars. One different between the both groups was medium of instruction used in communication and explaining the contents. The experimental group was taught using only English while the controlled group was mainly taught using students' first language or Thai.

2.2 Pre and post tests

The participants of the both groups were assigned to take 30 questions of pre and posttests regarding to the course of English for Exit Exam including listening, conversation, reading and grammars.

2.3 Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interview was used to collect qualitative data about the factors affecting students' leaning in target language group. The interview included 6 open-ended questions asking about the factors they found while participating in target language classroom. All of twenty participants in the experimental group were asked to interview.

3. Data collection procedures

The overall research procedure includes three phases: 1) pre-treatment process, 2) treatment process, and 3) post-treatment process.

At the pre-treatment process, the participants in both groups were asked to take the pre-test individually including four skills of thirty questions namely listening, conversation, reading and grammars.

At the treatment process, the participants were taught identical contents based on the course of English for Exit Exam in the first semester of academic year 2020, but the language strategy or medium of instruction utilized were different. The experimental group learned through target language strategy while the controlled group majorly learned through students' first language.

At the post-treatment process, the participants in both groups were asked to take the posttest individually. Then only the participants from the experimental group were asked to interview.

4. Findings

4.1 The results of the test performance of target language and students' L1 classrooms.

The results revealed the differences between the pretest and posttest scores of the participants in both groups as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of test scores between target language and students' L1 classrooms.

	Group	Mean	S.D.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	Experimental (n=20)	14.80	2.54	.443	.660
	Controlled (n=20)	14.50	1.63		
Posttest	Experimental (n=20)	19.35	3.11	3.51	.001*
	Controlled (n=20)	16.22	1.73		

*significant at 0.01 level

Table 1 shows the mean scores of pretest of the experimental group (M=14.80, SD=2.54) and those of the controlled group (M=14.50, SD=1.63). It indicates that there was no significant difference between the two groups (t=.443, sig.2-tailed=.660). In other words, the two groups were not significantly different in English proficiency before the experiment.

After the experiment, the results revealed that the mean scores of the experimental group (M=19.35, SD= 3.11) was higher than those of the controlled group (M=16.22, SD= 1.73). A significant different between the two groups (t=3.51, sig-2 tailed=.001) was found.

4.2 Factors affecting EFL students' learning through target language strategy

The results from the semi-structured interview revealed that there were factors affecting EFL students' learning through target language strategy. The particular results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Factors affecting EFL students' learning through target language strategy

No.	Categories	Aspects	Statements
1.	Supporting factors	Instructional media used by the teacher	I think the instructional medias provided by the teacher helped me to understand and remember the meaning of vocabulary very well (Respondent 5)
		Learning activities	I could feel that the learning activities were interesting and they enabled to attract students' interests, even though the teacher explained in English all the time. (Respondent 9)
		Verbal and non-verbal languages used by the teacher	I think I could understand the teacher's explanation because he used very simple vocabulary together with giving examples. (Respondent 12)

No.	Categories	Aspects	Statements
2.	Obstructing factors	Time allocation	In my opinion, I think time allocation was not sufficient, especially learning about reading because the teacher spoke English all the time. So, time should have been expanded. (Respondent 3)
		Technology medias	Personally, I think the technology medias were obstructive for understanding such as microphone and sound system were bad. I could not hear the teacher communicating very clear. (Respondent 1)
		English deficiency of the students	I found it difficult to understand because my English is very weak. So, I could not understand especially learning about grammar rules. (Respondent 7)

Table 2 above reveals numbers of factors supporting and obstructing participants' learning in target language classroom. For the supporting factors, the participants viewed that the instructional medias provided by the teacher were very helpful to understand vocabulary. Another supporting factor was learning activities. They pointed out that they could understand even the teacher used English all the time because the learning activities were interesting and attractive. They also perceived that even their English are poor but verbal and non-verbal language used by the teacher helped them learn better. For the obstructing factors, the participants viewed that time allocation provided by the teacher for each lesson was not sufficient since the teacher used only

English. Therefore, the teacher was required some more time to explain to make students understand better. They also viewed that technology medias including microphone and sound system obstructed their learning as they could not clearly hear the teacher explanation. The last obstructing factor was English deficiency of the students. They claimed that they found it difficult to understand. They agreed that they could have learned better if the teacher explained by using students' L1 sometimes since they have never learned English through target language before. In other words, this was their first time, therefore they need some more times to adapt and familiar with target language.

Discussion

The results from the tests revealed that the participants in target language learning group outperformed the students' L1 learning group. This is probably instructional medias used by the teacher was important to support their learning to understand the content better, even though the teacher used target language all the time. The instructional media used in this study included various pictures, videos, and examples contained in the handouts and worksheets. Gailea, Syafrizal & Indasari (2018) stated that instructional medias selected by the teacher are extremely important, especially teaching languages. Therefore, to make student interested in learning, the teachers have to select interesting instructional medias. If instructional medias are not interesting, students would be lack of motivation to learn and it will obstruct their learning. Instructional medias which are able to attract students' interests including pictures, videos and visual simulations. Turnbull & Arnett (2002) asserted that in EFL learning context, teachers are required to utilize appropriate instructional medias for learners. This point appears to cohere with McGrath (2013) who affirmed that roles of a teacher is not just to teach only, but also to select appropriate, attractive and adaptable instructional medias before teaching in order to achieve their learning goals (Tomlinson, 2012).

The results from the interview revealed an interesting finding about using target language. Some participants perceived that the learning activities provided by the teacher were interesting and attractive as they could attract learners' interest all the time. This point appears to cohere with Turnbull & Arnett (2002) who affirmed that teaching English using target language in EFL context, a teacher of English should imply pre-learning activity in order to enhance students before actual learning, and verbal and non-verbal used by the teacher were very helpful as body language use can help students increase their understanding about the meaning of the vocabulary. As suggested by Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour (2017) to succeed in implementing target language in an EFL context and expect high educational outcomes, non-verbal language must be frequently used.

Regarding obstructing factors, the participants perceived that time allocation in each lesson provided by the teacher was not sufficient. They claimed that this was their first time to learn English through target language, therefore they needed some time to be familiar with English, especially learning about grammar rules as they are complex as recommended by Jack & Ricard (2002) that teaching grammar rules, teachers should realize about time allocation since they are complicated. They also claimed that technology medias in the class were directly affecting their learning. They added that target language strategy requires them to listen carefully, so when microphones and sound system were bad, it led them get lost at some points. As suggested by Owoeye (2011) that learning will run appropriately if it is supported by availability of school facilities as it affects on students' learning. Therefore, students can learn comfortably and develop overall academic performance if school or classroom infrastructures are equipped. In addition, some participants found it difficult to understand when participating in target language classroom because of their own deficiency of English, especially when learning about

grammar rules. Thus, bilingual approach can be applicable but considering how to use it properly (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2001), especially when teaching grammar rules as it is complex (Gaebler, 2014).

Conclusion

As found in this study, target (English) language is more effective teaching strategy than students' first (Thai) language strategy. It indicated that target language strategy cannot only be utilized in ESL context but also in EFL context where students are considered low intermediate. However, some limitations were found while conducting this research. Firstly, some students claimed that time allocation for learning grammar rules need to be expanded as their English proficiency is weak. Secondly, technology medias were not supportive and made them get lost at some points. Lastly, the participants' deficiency of English made them experience problem in understanding English learning through target language.

Recommendations

As this teaching strategy is not widely used in EFL context and it might be difficult for teachers because of lack of confidence, therefore, code switching is allowed to be used sometimes (Al-Nofaie, 2010) and reduce using code switching when teachers feel more confident.

For students those who are very weak in English, they might not be confident. Thus, teachers are required to use very simple and understandable words together with body language and they should not be complained when English is exposed.

Students should be learned in a small group. In each group includes at least one member who is proficient in English in order to make them more confident to discuss and share knowledge among the group members.

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