

Causes of Problems in Learning English as a Second Language as Perceived by Higher Education Students

Paul Fairclough*

International College, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand

Keow Ngang Tang**

Institute for Research and Development in Teaching Profession for ASEAN, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand

Abstract

English as a second language (ESL) becomes attached and obligatory in Thailand's Higher Education system. English courses in Thailand Higher Education Institutions particularly to students who are studying on international programmes is significantly important as it is a measurement tool to the intellectual transformation and its initial impact on student's academic achievement and employability in the future. Physical, intellectual, and emotional involvement is needed to learn a second language, to successfully send and interpret linguistic messages. This research is designed to analyse the leading causes of the problems in learning ESL in a public university, Khon Kaen province, Thailand. Specifically, this research was aimed to investigate the leading causes of the problems in learning ESL; to examine whether there was any significant difference in the causes of problems faced by the higher education students on the basis of different attribute variables such as nationality, programme, faculties, the academic year of their study toward their learning habits, learning environment, learning attitude, and lecturer's competence using Second Language Acquisition Model. The methodology employed was a survey method. The research instrument so-called as SeWi's Scale on Causes of Problems in Learning ESL, consists of 62 items, adapted from William Dharma and Selvi (2011). A total of 528 higher education students are randomly selected from the six undergraduate programmes of an international college (Global Business, International Marketing, International Entrepreneurship, Communication Arts, International Affairs, and Tourism Management) and other faculties (Pharmaceutical Sciences, Engineering, Education, and Economics) which are offering international programmes. The collected data will be treated using a mean score, percentage, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression Enter method. The descriptive results showed that 63.6 percent of the samples are taught by foreign lecturers and 36.4 percent of them are taught by Thai lecturers. Most samples are Thai nationality 511 (96.8%). The inferential results using one-way ANOVA reported that there are statistically significant differences between group means of the learning environment as determined by samples who studied different English language courses ($F = 9.395, p = .000$).

**paul@kku.ac.th*

***tangng@kku.ac.th*

Besides, results also indicated that students from the different programmes are significantly facing the causes of problems, differences in their learning attitude ($F = 5.391$; $p = .005$), and their learning environment ($F = 4.540$; $p = .011$). Nevertheless, results also showed that students from different faculties and academic year of their study are significantly different, not only in their learning attitude ($F = 2.880$, $p = .001$; $F = 4.401$, $p = .002$), and learning environment ($F = 3.987$, $p = .000$; $F = 4.206$; $p = .002$) but also their perceptions towards lecturer's competence ($F = 3.026$, $p = .000$; $F = 2.780$, $p = .026$). Furthermore, intercorrelation analysis showed that the four causes of problems faced by samples are found intercorrelated with the r -value ranging from 0.198 to 0.579. This implies that the causes of problems in learning ESL were significantly related at a significant level of 0.01. Finally, the significant predictors were learning habits, learning attitude, lecturer's competence, and English language courses that samples attended. All four significant predictors were successfully contributing 44.0 percent of the variance towards their learning environment as shown in the multiple regression analysis. The results contribute significantly to the knowledge of proposing the causes of problems in learning ESL of higher education students in Thailand.

Keywords: Learning attitude; learning environment; learning habits; lecturer's competence

Acknowledgment

This research has been supported by the Khon Kaen University International College Research Grant. Grant number: No 09 F 20.

Introduction

Language is a very vital means of communication and English is being treated as a world language because of its vast presence all over the world (Yudha Pratama & Fitriani, 2020). Yudha Pratama and Fitriani emphasized that the aspect of language learning in higher education institutions is closely related to the use of English For Specific Purposes (ESP) approach. Thailand is one of the developing countries where Thai people learned English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to communicate and negotiate in international commerce, trading, and even learning in international higher education programmes (Wichanpricha, 2020). However, Thailand has encountered diverse problems in teaching and learning English over the past several decades (Noom-Ura, 2013). Besides, higher education students in Thailand are found to have lower English proficiency, and Thailand was ranked 55 out of 60 countries worldwide in EF English Proficiency Index 2017 (Luanganggoon, 2020). Nevertheless, Yunus, Mohamad, and Waelateh (2016) found that Thai first-year undergraduate students only reach the lower mean of receptive English vocabulary size at about 2,000-word families which were relatively under the standard of word families at 8,000, which mostly appear in general texts (Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010).

As globalization makes advancement, call for increased English proficiency ability as an international language is a necessity. Although English is a key subject starting in elementary basic education of Thailand, Thai people seldom have the opportunity to use the English language in their daily conversation and most of them are still not reaching sufficient proficiency including the higher education students (Tsuboya-Newell, 2017). Generally, students' poor achievement is blamed on the way the English language is taught in educational institutions. Phantharaphong, Sudathip, and Tang (2019) found that there is too much emphasis on grammar with very little time devoted to actual conversation practice while teachers are teaching ESL students. Besides, they also found that English language teachers are mainly

emphasizing the silent skills of reading and writing. Listening is rather passive as opposed to being an active part of the conversation. The focus is on accuracy and avoiding grammatical mistakes. The English language is in particular a key success to higher education students because it can sharpen their thoughts, guide, and control their entire activity (William Dharma & Selvi, 2011).

The Thai culture or character is another common cause for the poor development of the English language. This is because the Thai cultural norms are that Thai people are not willing to speak up in front of others in the case, there is a disruption, and they are also afraid of making mistakes and feel that they must speak perfect English. Therefore, they impose silence on themselves while they are learning the English language. There are so many factors that affect the process of learning English as a second language, including attitude, self-confidence, motivation, duration of exposure to the language, classroom conditions, environment, family background, and availability of competent teachers (Verghese, 2009).

Singaravelu (2001) found that there is a significant relationship between the problems faced by students in pronunciation, learning grammar, knowledge of sentence pattern, the habit of hearing news, the rectification of homework, memorization without understanding, remedial teaching, and different variables regarding gender, locality, and type of management. Furthermore, Jalaluddin, Awal, and Bakar (2009) highlighted those structural differences between English and Thai have also been identified as another problem faced by higher education students in learning the English language. The environment that is not conducive to English language learning further adds to the problem.

Tang (2020) pointed out the challenges of teaching English as a medium of instruction and its impacts on the institutional setting of an international college in Thailand. The escalating currency of ESP is an index of its growing popularity in Thailand where its predominance creates several pedagogical issues and problems for the lecturers and students who enrol in international programmes delivered via English as a medium of instruction. Tang interviewed 12 lecturers using a purposive sampling technique and analysed data using thematic analysis. Her results showed that there are four challenges regarding implementation of ESP in Thailand's higher education institutions, namely linguistic, cultural, structural, and identity-related (institutional) challenges which underline four important aspects of EMI implementation, namely, the importance for language improvement, subject matter learning, career prospects, and internationalization strategy. Tang implied her results can yield a double dividend, which will bring about a beneficial internationalization and the promise of improved ranking with it for raising Thailand higher education institutions' local and global position. Such recognition should help alleviate a deficit modelling of ESP that is characteristic of native speaker bias by assuaging the negatives of ESP with its positives.

In the Thai higher education context, English has been used as a medium of instruction for international programmes. Causes of problems in learning English is an essential area for this research as it would help the higher education students identify the problems which will hinder their learning in other core courses and make them learn English with ease and comfort. As a result, researchers conducted the research to analyse the various reasons for the problems faced by second language learners.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Second Language Acquisition Model (SLA) which was created by Rod Ellis (1994) to build the framework for investigating higher education students' choice or use of language learning strategies (Izawati @ Siti Zawiyah, 2008) was employed by researchers as their conceptual framework. This model identifies three sets of dimensions that explain the process of second

language learning, namely individual learner differences, learner strategies, and outcome. The first set deals with individual learner differences that come in seven different categories, namely age, aptitude, motivation, learning styles, beliefs, affective states, and personality. While higher education students are learning the second language, these diverse individuals operate in a different situational and social environment which affects the strategies that they choose. The choice of strategies is the second set of the dimensions by looking at cognitive, metacognitive, affective, memory, compensation, and social. This then goes to the third set which is the outcome. This deals with the level of achievement in attaining the second language. It has a two-way relationship with the earlier set. In other words, the result of acquiring the second language depends on the strategies used (Mat Saad, Mohd Sidek, Baharun, Idrus & Md Yunus, 2016).

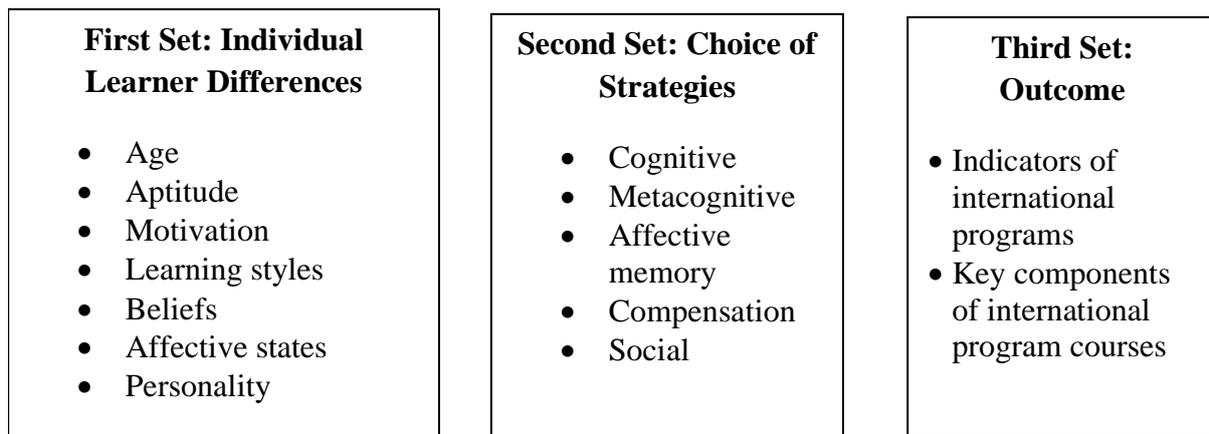


Figure 1: Second Language Acquisition Model adapted from Mat Saad et al. (2016)

There are two theoretical underpinnings of the research framework above, namely the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Sociocultural Theory (SCT). The characteristics of ELT are the propositions derived from these earlier theorists, namely John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget (Kolb, 1984). The main tenet from ELT is parallel to this research as learning involves transactions between the students and the environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This is further supported by Beard and Wilson's (2007) handbook on ELT that indicates learning a language is a 'sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the student and the outer world of the environment' (p.2). Kolb and Kolb (2005) further strengthen this concept by discussing learning space theory that emphasizes the setting that the student is in; for instance, an immediate setting which is termed as microsystem involving the course and the classroom. Besides the environment, it also takes into account the people around the student like in a mesosystem that includes family members. In other words, the concept of environment in ELT also comprises of the people around the student who are always using their mother tongue in their interactions.

SCT was proposed by Lev Vygotsky including six germane tenets, namely mediated mind, genetic domains, unit of analysis, Activity Theory, internalization and inner speech, and Zone of Proximal Development. However, this research only embraces characteristics from Activity Theory and Zone of Proximal Development. This is in line with the concept of mediation where the mediator can be a tool or a person (Mamour, 2008). Zone of Proximal Development is defined as a distance between the actual developmental level and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in

collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, the Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes the role of other people such as lecturers and friends in enhancing the learning process.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this research is to empirically investigate the leading cause of problems in learning English as a second language (ESL). The specific objectives cover the identification of the leading causes of problems in learning ESL, the significant differences in the leading causes of problems between different group attributes, intercorrelations between the four causes of problems, and the significant predictors toward the learning environment as the cause of problems in learning ESL. The factors that affect the process of learning ESL are hypothesized as attitude, self-confidence, motivation, duration of exposure to the language, classroom conditions, environment, family background, and availability of competent lecturers.

This research embarks on the following specific research objectives:

1. To identify higher education students' perceptions of the leading causes of problems while they were learning ESL.
2. To examine whether there were any significant differences in the causes of problems faced by the higher education students on the basis of different attribute variables such as nationality, programme, faculties, the academic year of their study, and English language courses that they attended towards their learning habits, learning environment, learning attitude, and lecturer's competence using Second Language Acquisition Model.
3. To examine the intercorrelation between the four causes of problems faced by higher education students.
4. To examine the significant predictors towards higher education students' perceptions of the learning environment as the cause of problems while learning ESL.

Method of Study

The researchers utilized a survey research design using a questionnaire to accumulate quantitative data. The questionnaire was used as a research instrument to investigate various causes for the problems in learning ESL. The target group was all higher education students who were studying on the undergraduate international programmes at the International College, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Science, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Education, and Faculty of Economic at a public university, located in Khon Kaen province, Thailand. The multistage sampling technique followed by the stratified random sampling technique was administered to select samples according to class size. The final samples were selected proportionally from the different stratum. The required sample size is 528 higher education students according to Krejcie and Morgan's Table at a 95 percent confidence level. The sample size of each stratum in stratified random sampling is proportionate to the population size of the stratum when viewed against the entire population. This means that each stratum has the same sampling fraction. In total, the 528 samples consisted of 268 (50.8%) students from the International College, 161 (30.4%) students from the Faculty of Engineering, 59 (11.2%) students from the

Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, 30 (5.7%) students from the Faculty of Education, and 10 (1.9%) students from the Faculty of Economics. Table 1 below shows the distribution of samples.

Table 1
Distribution of the samples

Faculties	Programmes	Frequency	Percent
International College	International Affairs	62	11.7
	Tourism Management	59	11.2
	International Marketing	46	8.7
	Global Business	45	8.5
	Communication Arts	37	7.0
	International Entrepreneurship	19	3.6
Faculty of Engineering	Digital Media Engineering	50	9.5
	Logistics Engineering	38	7.2
	Telecommunications Engineering	39	7.4
	Chemical Engineering	34	6.4
Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences	Pharmaceutical Sciences	59	11.2
Faculty of Education	TESOL	30	5.7
Faculty of Economics	Economics	10	1.9
Total		528	100

Survey questions in the form of a questionnaire were distributed to the 528 students who are studying English for Specific Academic Purposes by Cambridge University through online survey software. The original questionnaire is the so-called SeWi's Scale on Causes of Problems in Learning ESL adapted from William Dharma and Selvi (2011) to collect information on their perceptions. This method benefits this research in terms of obtaining data more efficiently as time, energy, and costs are minimised (Wyse, 2012), and it provided an excellent means of measuring attitudes and orientations in a large population which can, therefore, be generalised to a larger population (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012).

The survey instrument was administered in the English language to ensure that the respondents could understand all the 68 items. Section A of the instrument consists of six items, was intended to gather information regarding demographic factors of the respondents which included information pertaining to their background such as their nationality, lecturer's ethnicity, study programme, attached faculties, the academic year of their study, and their attended English language courses. Section B was specifically adapted from SeWi's Scale by the researchers to gauge the frequency of higher education students' perceptions in terms of their causes of problems while they were learning ESL. This section is comprised of 62 items. There were four causes of problems in learning ESL: Habit of learning the English language (2 items), Learning environment (18 items), Learning attitude (19 items), and Lecturer's competence (23 items), giving a total of 62 items. To measure the samples' responses, a four-point Likert scale was used, ranging from never, rarely, sometimes to always.

Pilot testing of the instrument was conducted on five experts and 30 undergraduate students who were studying in an international programme of a public university located in Bangkok, Thailand. A panel of five experts was required to give comments and feedback on the validity of the instrument. On the other hand, the 30 undergraduate students were required to respond to the instrument so that researchers could check on the reliability of the instrument

using Cronbach alpha value identification. It could be concluded that the instrument was reliable and good to use as the Cronbach alpha value was 0.94. Besides researchers made the necessary revision according to the feedback from the five experts. In addition to the experts' advice, confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the construct validity of the instrument. The items with validity indices of 0.20 and above were selected for the final draft.

Descriptive statistics including means score, standard deviation, and percentage while inferential statistics, namely one-way ANOVA, Pearson's correlation coefficients, and multiple regression Enter method were employed to analyse the collected data. The responded questionnaires were collected and scored with the help of a scoring key. By using the item whole analysis, the total scores obtained by each sample would be correlated with the total score for each item. The intercorrelations among the four leading causes of problems in learning ESL were calculated using the Pearson product-moment correlation formula. Finally, the researchers examined the predictors of the learning environment as a cause of problems using the multiple regression Enter method. In this research, the level of significance is taken as $p \leq .05$.

Results

Researchers deployed the online surveys to 528 samples parallel to the proposed sample through emails on the 25th of September 2020. Although the online surveys were accessible to samples, they were not responding immediately. After several reminders had been sent, all 528 distributed online questionnaires were successfully collected by the 20th of November 2020, giving a response rate of 100 percent. The results are presented according to the research objectives, which have been indicated previously. The initial results were the descriptive results of attributes of the samples and four variables of perceptions on the leading causes of problems in learning ESL. This is followed by examining the gap between the different groups towards their perceptions on leading causes of problems in learning ESL using the Second Language Acquisition Model. Then the intercorrelations between the four variables were analysed. Finally, the effects of samples' attribute variables and leading causes of problems in learning ESL on their learning environment were examined using Enter multiple regression.

Descriptive Results of Attributes of the Samples

Of the 528 samples who were responding to an email invitation to participate in this research, 511 (96.8%) were local Thai, 10 (1.9%) from the Republic of China, four (0.8%) were mixed Thai with other ethnicities, and three (0.6%) samples, each from the three respective countries, namely the Philippines, France, and Cambodia. English is not only an ESL but also a foreign language to all the 528 samples. However, 212 (40.2%) of them were taught by foreign lecturers so-called native speakers of English, 192 (36.4%) samples were taught by local Thai lecturers, and 124 (23.5%) samples were taught by a lecturer who is Thai but has American citizenship.

The majority of the samples are first-year students, a total of 446 (84.5%). This is followed by 57 (10.8%) of them are second-year students and 18 (3.4%) of them are final-year students. The smallest group is the third-year students, which comprises of only seven of them. All samples were taking one of the following English language courses offered by the International College, namely Creative Reading and Writing (CRW), English for Communication in Multicultural Societies (ECMS), English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), Public Speaking (PS), and University Study Skills in English (USSE). Table 2 gives an overview of the general profile of all samples.

Table 2

The general profile of the samples

General information	Frequency	Percent
<i>Their Nationality</i>		
Thai	511	96.8
Chinese	10	1.9
Mixed Thai with other ethnicities	4	0.7
Filipino	1	0.2
French	1	0.2
Cambodian	1	0.2
<i>Their Lecturers</i>		
Foreigner	212	40.2
Thai	192	36.4
Thai with US citizenship	124	23.4
<i>Their Academic Year</i>		
First-year	446	84.5
Second-year	57	10.8
Third-year	7	1.3
Final year	18	3.4
<i>English Language Courses</i>		
Creative Reading & Writing	315	59.7
English for Communication in Multicultural Societies	72	13.6
English for Specific Academic Purposes	96	18.2
Public Speaking	39	7.4
University Study Skills in English	6	1.1

Descriptive Results of Causes of Problems in Learning ESL

The descriptive results of four variables of perceptions on the leading causes of problems in learning ESL have identified their levels based on mean score. Table 3 shows the interpretation of the levels of variables as proposed by Sauro (2011).

Table 3

Interpretation of variable level based on the mean score

Mean Score Range	Interpretation
4.50 – 5.00	Highest
3.50 – 4.49	High
2.50 – 3.49	Medium
1.50 – 2.49	Low
1.00 – 1.49	Lowest

Table 4 shows the mean score and standard deviations of four variables of the samples' perceptions on the leading causes of problems while they were learning ESL. The mean score for the four leading causes of problems ranged from 2.60 to 3.33. This implies that the four leading causes of problems were at a medium level according to Sauro's (2011) interpretation scale as elucidated in Table 3. The first order found that the highest frequency level was students' perceptions toward the lecturer's competence ($\bar{x} = 3.33$, $SD = 0.46$). The second order was their learning environment ($\bar{x} = 2.79$, $SD = 0.37$). This is followed by their learning habits ($\bar{x} = 2.67$, $SD = 0.62$). The cause of problems with the lowest level was their learning attitude ($\bar{x} = 2.60$, $SD = 0.38$).

Table 4

Leading causes of problems in learning ESL

Leading Causes of Problems	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Level
Lecturer's competence	3.33	0.46	Medium
Learning environment	2.79	0.37	Medium
Learning habits	2.67	0.62	Medium
Learning attitude	2.60	0.38	Medium

One-way ANOVA Results of Causes of Problems in Learning ESL

Before the researchers started to analyse data using one-way ANOVA, the researchers must confirm the population means are all equal, the researchers then determined the significance level of 0.05 indicating a 5% risk of concluding that a difference exists when there is no actual difference for the analysis. Results reported that there were statistically significant differences between group means of the learning environment as determined by samples who studied in different English language courses ($F = 9.395$, $p = .000$) as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

One-way ANOVA results of learning environment between samples with different English language courses

Variables	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Learning environment / English language course					
Between groups	31.716	42	.755	9.395	.000
Within groups	38.983	485	.080		
Total	70.699	527			

Moreover, one-way ANOVA analysis indicated that samples from the different programmes are significantly facing the causes of problems differences in their learning attitude ($F = 5.391$; $p = .005$) and their learning environment ($F = 4.540$; $p = .011$). However, samples from different programmes are not significantly different between their group means in their learning habits and their perceptions of the lecturer's competence because the significance values are 0.890 and 0.707 which are above 0.05. This implies that samples from different programmes are statistically different in their learning environment and learning attitude, but they are not different in their learning habits and their perceptions of lecturer's competence as the causes of problems while they are learning ESL as elucidated in Table 6.

Table 6

One-way ANOVA results of leading causes of problems between samples in different programmes

Variables	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Learning habits					
Between groups	.090	2	.045	.117	.890
Within groups	201.380	525	.384		
Total	201.470	527			
Learning environment					
Between groups	1.202	2	.601	4.540	.011

Within groups	69.497	525	.132		
Total	70.699	527			
Learning attitude					
Between groups	1.561	2	.781	5.391	.005
Within groups	76.017	525	.145		
Total	77.578	527			
Lecturer's competence					
Between groups	.148	2	.074	.346	.707
Within groups	112.062	525	.213		
Total	112.209	527			

Furthermore, Table 7 shows the output of the one-way ANOVA analysis and the researchers found that samples from different faculties are significantly different in the group means to face the leading causes of problems, namely learning environment ($F = 3.987$; $p = 0.000$), learning attitude ($F = 2.880$; $p = 0.001$), and their perceptions towards their lecturer's competence ($F = 3.026$; $p = 0.000$) except their learning habits ($F = 1.656$; $p = 0.073$).

Table 7

One-way ANOVA results of leading causes of problems between samples in different faculties

Variables	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Learning habits					
Between groups	7.484	12	.624	1.656	.073
Within groups	193.986	515	.377		
Total	201.470	527			
Learning environment					
Between groups	6.010	12	.501	3.987	.000
Within groups	64.690	515	.126		
Total	70.699	527			
Learning attitude					
Between groups	4.879	12	.407	2.880	.001
Within groups	72.700	515	.141		
Total	77.578	527			
Lecturer's competence					
Between groups	7.390	2	.616	.346	.000
Within groups	104.819	515	.204		
Total	112.209	527			

Nevertheless, results also showed that samples from the different academic years of their study have significant differences, not only in the learning attitude ($F = 4.206$, $p=.002$), and learning environment ($F = 4.401$; $p=.002$) but also their perceptions towards lecturer's competence ($F = 2.780$, $p=.026$). Table 8 shows the one-way ANOVA results of the causes of problems in learning ESL in terms of the academic year of their study. However, there are no significant differences in their learning habits ($F = 2.030$; $p=.0089$) regardless of they are juniors or seniors in their study.

Table 8

One-way ANOVA results of leading causes of problems between samples in the academic year of their study

Variables	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Learning habits					
Between groups	3.081	4	.770	2.030	.089
Within groups	198.389	523	.379		
Total	201.470	527			
Learning environment					
Between groups	2.204	4	.551	4.206	.002
Within groups	68.495	523	.131		
Total	70.699	527			
Learning attitude					
Between groups	2.526	4	.632	4.401	.002
Within groups	75.052	523	.144		
Total	77.578	527			
Lecturer's competence					
Between groups	2.336	4	.584	2.780	.026
Within groups	109.873	523	.210		
Total	112.209	527			

Intercorrelations between the Four Causes of Problems in Learning ESL

The intercorrelations results between the four causes of problems in learning ESL would determine their strengths of association according to de Vaus's (2002) interpretation of correlation coefficients as shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Designation strength of association based on the size of correlation coefficients

Strength of association	Negative	Positive
Low to moderate	-0.29 till -0.10	0.10 till 0.29
Moderate to substantial	-0.49 till -0.30	0.30 till 0.49
Substantial to very strong	-0.69 till -0.50	0.50 till 0.69
Very strong	-0.89 till -0.70	0.70 till 0.89
Near perfect	-0.99 till -0.90	0.90 till 0.99
Perfect	-1.00	1.00

Table 10 provides the coefficients of correlation of each subscale with each other subscale of causes of problems in learning ESL, showing the relationships between the pairs of subscales, and between the individual subscales. The subscale intercorrelations range from 0.198 to 0.579, which is composed of items from the other subscales. The Pearson's correlation coefficients between the four subscales of causes of problems in learning ESL showed a significant association ($p < .01$), with the strength of association being 'Low to moderate' to 'Substantial to very strong', and positive. In other words, the intercorrelation analysis showed that the four causes of problems faced by samples are found intercorrelated with the r-value ranging from 0.198 to 0.579. This implies that the causes of problems in learning ESL were significantly related at a significant level of 0.01.

As indicated in Table 9, the strength of intercorrelation results ranked in order from high to low as follows. The strongest strength was the Learning environment vs Learning attitude ($r = .579$; $p < .01$). The second strongest strength was the Learning environment vs Lecturer's competence ($r = .370$; $p < .01$). This is followed by the Learning environment vs Learning habits ($r = .357$; $p < .01$), Learning attitude vs Learning habits ($r = .258$; $p < .01$), and Learning attitude vs Lecturer's competence ($r = .219$; $p < .01$). The Lecturer's competence vs Learning habits had an interaction with the weakest association ($r = .198$; $p < .01$) but it still had a positive and significant correlation. This indicates that only the Learning environment was associated 'substantial to very strong' with an increase in learning attitude. Table 10 shows the details of the intercorrelation results.

Table 10

Intercorrelation results of four leading causes of problems

Variables	Learning Habits	Learning Environment	Learning Attitude	Lecturer's Competence
Learning Habits	1	.357**	.258**	.198**
Learning Environment	.357**	1	.579**	.370**
Learning Attitude	.258**	.579**	1	.219**
Lecturer's Competence	.198**	.370**	.219**	1

Significant Predictors of the Learning Environment as Leading Cause of Problems

The researchers used Enter regression analysis to identify the significant predictors for learning environment as a leading cause of problems. The learning environment was chosen because it was found to be the most essential leading cause of problems in learning ESL based on the initial results of one-way ANOVA and intercorrelations as presented above. In this analysis, the six attributes of samples and the other three leading causes of problems were created as predictive variables, while the learning environment as a cause of problems was treated as the dependent variable. The purpose of estimating this regression equation was to identify the predictive variables that have a significant impact on the learning environment as a cause of problems, that is either the attributes of samples or the other three leading causes of problems that constitute the predictors for the learning environment as a cause of problems while the higher education students were learning ESL.

The estimated regression equation was significant at $.05$ ($p < .05$), implying that from the nine predictive variables, students' learning habits, students' learning attitude, their perceptions towards lecturer's competence, and English language courses that they attended had an impact on their learning environment as a cause of problems: thereby qualifying these to be the predictors for the latter. In brief, these four variables had a linear association with the learning environment as a cause of problems in learning ESL. The R^2 (.440) indicates that the impact of the four significant predictors accounts for 44.0 percent of the variation in the dependent variable.

In this analysis, the size of the standardised coefficient (β) directly indicates the importance of these predictors relative to one another. In this context, the learning attitude ($\beta = .480$) was the most essential predictor, followed by their perceptions toward the lecturer's competence ($\beta = .223$), and their learning habits ($\beta = .182$). The predictor with the least impact

was the English language courses that they attended ($\beta = -.083$). All the other leading causes of problems and one attribute of samples were included in the regression model at $p < .05$ indicating that only four predictive variables were relevant factors of the learning environment as a cause of problems. It can be concluded that the other attributes of samples such as their nationality, foreign or local lecturers teaching them, their programmes, faculties, year of academic study, are not factors affecting their learning environment as a cause of problems while higher education students are learning ESL. Table 11 illustrates variables for which the coefficients are statistically significant as the results obtained from the Enter regression analysis.

Table 11

Regression analysis results of learning environment cause of problems in learning ESL

Learning environment	B	Std. Error	β	t	p	R²
Constant	.891	.134	-	6.668	.000	.440
Learning habits	.108	.021	.182	5.224	.000	
Learning attitude	.459	.033	.480	13.764	.000	
Lecturer's competence	.177	.027	.223	6.500	.000	
English courses	-.029	.014	-.083	-2.087	.037	
Student's nationality	-.040	.032	-.041	-1.249	.212	
Lecturer's ethnicity	-.022	.019	-.047	-1.138	.256	
Programme	-.001	.005	-.009	-.150	.881	
Faculty	-.022	.018	-.070	-1.177	.240	
Academic year	.006	.020	.011	.321	.748	

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the research stressed that environment is the leading cause for the problems in learning English as perceived by higher education students while comparing it with the other three dimensions, namely learning habits, learning attitude, and lecturer's competence. Besides, there is a significant difference in perceiving the environment as the cause of problems in learning ESL with regard to the English language courses that they attended. Moreover, there are significant differences in perceiving the environment, lecturer's competence, and attitude as the causes of problems in learning ESL regarding their programmes, faculties, and academic year of their study. However, there is no significant difference in their learning habits as the cause of problems in learning ESL in relation to any of their attributes. The research results provide indications to international programmes of all higher education institutions in Thailand with regard to how to increase English language proficiency as second language learners. Therefore, international programme courses in the future can be designed to have clear instructional goals in place for English language development along with support systems for lecturers and students throughout the entire educational experience and not just in pre-academic support programmes such as Academic English Preparation (AEP).

The SeWi's Scale on Causes of Problems in Learning ESL used in this research consists of four subscales, namely learning habits, learning environment, learning attitude, and lecturer's competence. Intercorrelation of subscales revealed generally 'low to moderate', 'moderate to substantial', and 'substantial to very strong' relationships among measures, indicating that there may be considerable variability in a higher education student's perception across the four leading causes of problems in learning ESL. Since the

intercorrelations range from 0.198 to 0.579 have significant clinical and research implications.

Finally, the results of this research revealed that higher education students' learning attitude, their perceptions of lecturer's competence, learning habits, and the English language courses that they attended were the four significant predictors of the learning environment as the cause of problems in learning ESL. This result has broken new ground suggesting teachers should focus on these four predictive variables if they plan to improve student's learning environment. Educational officers from the Ministry of Education may arrange guidelines and orientation programmes in English. Moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education should conduct in-service training to provide information on students' development in English at regular intervals.

In conclusion, the research results will add to the previous research investigating lecturers' perceptions of students' ability (Craig & Pepler, 2007), studies related to coping strategies for English language learners in higher education (Harrison & Shi, 2016), and research into English language improvement made during university study (Humphreys, Haugh, Fenton-Smith, Lobo, Michael, & Walkinshaw, 2012) as a contribution to experts' knowledge.

Pedagogical Implications

The results from the current research have pedagogical implications for the implementation of international programmes, particularly at Thailand Higher Education Institutions. This is because one of the reasons for implementing international programmes is to improve the higher education students' English proficiency in content-based professional expertise. Therefore, higher education students' perceptions toward the leading cause for the problems in learning ESL, namely learning environment should be considered by lecturers to improve their student's limited English proficiency ability. Based on these results, it seems that lecturers need a clear understanding of the significant predictors, namely learning attitude, their perceptions of lecturer's competence, learning habits, and the English language courses, and how those predictors should be put into practice. Besides, this particular issue is necessary to be clearly understood by the university authorities. This is because university authorities can provide clearer guidance that allows the commonality of understanding about the leading causes for the problems and their factors that affect higher education students in learning ESL.

References

- Beard, C., & Wilson, J. P. (2007). *Experiential learning: A best practice handbook for educators and trainers* (2nd ed.). New Delhi, India: Kogan Page.
- Craig, W., & Pepler, D. (2007). Understanding bullying: From research to practice. *Canadian Psychology*, 48(2), 86–93.
- de Vaus, D. (2002). *Surveys in social research* (5th ed.). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. W. (2012). *Educational research competencies for analysis and application* (10th ed.). Massachusetts, United States of America: Pearson.
- Harrison, J., & Shi, H. (2016). English language learners in higher education: An exploratory conversation. *Journal of International Studies*, 6(2), 415-430.
- Humphreys, P., Haugh, M., Fenton-Smith, B., Lobo, A., Michael, R., & Walkinshaw, I. (2012). Tracking international students' English proficiency over the first semester of

- undergraduate study. *IELTS Research Report Online, no. 1*. Retrieved January 12, 2021 from: [\(3\) \(PDF\) IELTS Research Reports Online Series | Rowan Michael, Michael Haugh, and Pamela Humphreys - Academia.edu](#)
- Izawati @ Siti Zawiyah, I. (2008). *English language strategies used by polytechnic students* (Unpublished master thesis), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia.
- Jalaluddin, N. H., Awal, N. M., & Bakar, K. A. (2009). Linguistics and environment in English language learning: Towards the development of quality human capital. *European Journal of Social Sciences, 9*(4), 627-642.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 4*(2), 193-212.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey, United States of America: Prentice Hall.
- Laufer, B., & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, G. C. (2010). Lexical threshold revisited: Lexical text coverage, learners' vocabulary size, and reading comprehension. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 22*(1), 15-30.
- Luangangoon, N. (2020). Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) Teaching Practices in Thailand Higher Education. *The Asian ESP Journal, 16*(4), 233-258.
- Mamour, C. T. (2008). The relevance and implications of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in the second language classroom. *ARECLS, 5*, 244-262.
- Mat Saad, N. S., Mohd Sidek, H@H., Baharun, H., Idrus, M. M., & Md Yunus, M. (2016). A conceptual framework to explore the English language learning experiences of international students in Malaysia. In *Proceedings of ADVED 2016 2nd International Conference on Advances in Education and Social Sciences*, 10-12 October 2016 (pp. 460-471). Istanbul, Turkey.
- Noom-Ura, S. (2013). English-teaching problems in Thailand and Thai teachers' professional development needs. *English Language Teaching, 6*(11), 139-147.
- Phantharakphong, P., Sudathip, P., & Tang, K. N. (2019). The relationship between reading skills and English proficiency of higher education students: Using online practice program. *Asian EFL Journal, 23*(3), 80-103.
- Sauro, J. (2011). *How to interpret survey responses: 5 techniques*. Retrieved January 7, 2021, from www.measuringu.com/
- Singaravelu, G. (2001). A study of the problems of students of higher secondary classes in learning English as a second language in Thiruvavur District. *Indian Educational Abstract, 6*(2), p. 22.
- Tang, K. N. (2020). Challenges and importance of teaching English as a medium of instruction in Thailand international college. *The Journal of English as an International Language, 15*(2), 97-118.
- Tsuboya-Newell, I. (October 29, 2017). Why do Japanese have trouble learning English? *The Japan Times*. Retrieved December 30, 2020, from: [Why do Japanese have trouble learning English? | The Japan Times](#)
- Vergheese, P. C. (2009). *Teaching English as a second language* (9th ed.). New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Interaction between learning and development mind and society* (pp. 79-91). Cambridge, United States of America: Harvard University Press.
- Wichanpricha, T. (2020). Fostering collaborative activities in vocabulary learning: Thai EFL lower-proficiency undergraduate students. *The Asian ESP Journal, 16*(5.2), 33-52.

- William Dharma, R. B., & Selvi, K. (2011). Causes of problems in learning English as a second language as perceived by higher secondary students. *Journal on English Language Teaching, 1*(4), 40-45.
- Wyse, S. E. (2012). 4 main benefits of survey research. Retrieved January 2, 2021, from www.snapsurveys.com/
- Yudha Pratama, M. G., & Fitriani, S. (2020). The perception of teacher and students on the use of content-based instruction in teaching speaking at P4M Mataram. *The Asian ESP Journal, 16*(4), 22-32.
- Yunus, K., Mohamad, M., & Waelateh, B. (2016). The breadth of receptive vocabulary knowledge among English major university students. *Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS), 1*, 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol1isspp7-1>