

Exploring students' learning experiences in a Thai EFL classroom: a narrative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

EFL students relatively attain learning experiences from activities they perform in the classroom. This article explored the stories of students' learning experiences in a Thai EFL classroom and looked through their stories about learning experiences which contribute most to the improvement of their language skills. Four out of thirty grade-10th students in the English as Supplementary class at one of Demonstration Schools in Lopburi Thailand participated in this study. In eliciting the participants' stories, narrative inquiry was carried out as the design of this research. The data were collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis. Afterward, they were analyzed through thematic analysis. The first finding showed that there were 22 learning experiences attained by Thai students during the ES class which belonged to 1) eleven learning experiences for reading, 2) two learning experiences for writing, and 3) nine learning experiences for other skills. The second finding of students' perceptions revealed that the most helpful learning activities in improving the students' English skills were 1) reading fiction, 2) watching movies, and 3) reading and translation. These activities provided at least two significant learning experiences for the students, including 1) knowing more vocabularies and 2) working in a group. This study implies that studying learning experiences which promote the students' language skill improvement is essential for English teachers to select or plan best learning experiences.

Keywords: *EFL classroom; learning activity; learning experience; narrative inquiry*

Introduction

In an educational field, a teacher arranges a set of learning experiences for students to achieve the intended learning outcomes [1]. The teacher carries out different strategies for students to get various learning experiences and to become proficient in English more easily. Therefore, some of the students' learning experiences are acquired from activities in the classroom [2]. Although they accomplish a similar learning activity, they are often learning something relatively different [3]. It is because learners are diverse; they learn in different ways according to their personal needs and socio-cultural background.

In the EFL context, there has been a discussion about the characteristics of Asian EFL students. Their characteristics such as passivity and quietness are assumed to be the reason how they reluctantly engage in the classroom task or activity [4]. The causes of such behavior are situation specific, which is elaborated to the unsuitable methodologies and the lack of language proficiency.

However, instead of assuming their characteristics to be stagnant, teachers of EFL students should be aware of the effect of context [5]. As an educator, the teacher has a role to design specific situation and learning activity to which the context is suitable for the students to grow and get various learning experiences. Therefore, it is important for teachers to study the students' perceptions of learning activity, especially which contribute most in the improvement of students' language skills. Thus, the teacher can understand the students' point of view related to the context and design better learning experiences.

In November 2018, one of the researchers had the chance to join an internship program to teach students in one of secondary schools in Lopburi, Thailand. According to Darasawang [6], the purpose of foreign language teaching in Thailand is to promote communication, education, business, and cultural spread. Communicative language approach is carried out with the focus on teaching English for communication. In Thailand, English is a compulsory subject in second-

ary school because it is one of the standards in the National University Entrance Examination.

The school where the researchers conducted the study is a Demonstration School under the Thepsatri Rajabhat University which provides student teachers with in-practice teaching opportunities. The school provides two kinds of program namely English as a Foundation (EF) class and English as a Supplementary (ES) class. English as a Supplementary is also known as Reading and Writing class, and this is where the researchers attempts to focus.

Based on the preliminary research, it was found a phenomenon in which the students in the English as a Supplementary (ES) class were eager to have a reading activity of the storybook entitled "Pocahontas" and to line up to have an asking and answering questions. Moreover, some of them had a pretty good speaking ability as secondary level students. From this phenomenon, the researchers were interested to find out what learning experiences from the students' perceptions were significant for their English skill improvement.

The term learning experience is first defined as "the interaction between the learner and the external condition in the environment to which he can react" [7]. It is one of the basic principles in designing a curriculum. It is also understood as what the learner does to learn something, not what the teacher does. Meanwhile, "planned learning experience" is any activity that provides knowledge or skills, or that changes attitudes, and is purposefully planned and presented as a learning event to be contributing to the development of learning outcomes [1]. It is then understood that any interaction student involves in the process of learning is considered a learning experience [8]. What students speak, listen, see, and feel about learning are parts of the experience.

Learning experience differs from learning activity although both are performed by students specifically – not the teacher. Although students receive the same type of learning activity, it later becomes their own learning experience depending on how they process it [3] [7]. Therefore, learning experience results from learning activity that students perform. In the ELT classroom context, learning experience consist of learning experience in speaking, listening, reading, and listening activity.

Speaking: In speaking skill, students experience interaction either with the teacher or with other students, which is one aspect of a learning experience. Tuan and Nhu mention several oral interactions in the classroom, which include answering and asking questions, making comments, and taking part in a discussion [9]. Other interactions are in the form of discussions, skits, joint problem

-solving tasks, or dialogue journals.

Listening: Activities such as listening to/using video material, listening to/using cassettes, listening to a teacher talking, and listening then choosing an answer to the question are the example of learning experiences concerning listening skills [10][3]. Besides, Broughton et al. state two kinds of listening practices, namely extensive listening and intensive listening [11]. Extensive listening refers to all kinds of listening activities which are understandable and enjoyable [12]. Meanwhile, intensive listening is a more controlled way with a focus on just one or two specific points. The common example of intensive listening in the classroom is listening to a video material to find out specific information.

Reading: Broughton et al. group the activities in reading into two, namely extensive reading (survey reading, skimming, and superficial reading) and intensive reading (content study reading and linguistic study reading) [11]. Extensive reading is a type of reading in which what the learner read is what interests him. Meanwhile, in intensive reading, the content is determined as in content study reading and linguistic study reading.

Writing: Another aspect of learning experience is a task. Several types of tasks including collaboratively construct a text to ask other students, make an information gap tasks, create a role-play, make a debate, and prepare part of a procedural text [9].

In addition to the traditional way of teaching, students can get learning experiences through interactive software applications. One of the fun learning activities is done through e-learning, which involves technology to assist learning. There are some options in educational gaming includes branching stories, interactive spreadsheets, and other variations [13].

Identifying students' learning experience is one of the methods in the process of designing syllabus. It is useful since previous learning experience is the key to students' need. It reviews about the strength and weakness of each student, defining common areas of interest, as well as individual and group needs [14]. The number of attention students gives to learning activities may reflect their judgments of the significance of the kinds of learning experiences they encounter, which may depend on the adequacy of need analysis.

Some studies concerning on students' perceptions of learning activities have been conducted mostly in higher education classroom [15] [16] [17] [18]. However, the notion of students' learning experience at EFL classroom in secondary school level has not been fully explored or fully understood.

Some studies stated that digging story of students' learning experiences also allowed the

researchers to understand better students' learning habit, life struggle in general, students' satisfaction with the program which lead to the educational evaluation and improvement [19] [20]. The planned learning experience in a classroom is essential to set significant learning, which leads to significant learning outcomes. In this way, EFL public high school instruction can include learning experiences that are significant in their courses [21].

Rao, for example, studied the perceptions of Chinese university students of the usefulness and the appropriateness of communicative and non-communicative activities [17]. Dunlap & Lowenthal examined the shared stories of graduate students about their best learning experiences [15]. The stories were intended to discover underlying instructional themes and attributes of best learning experience.

In addition, a study by Matic explored English language learning experiences of English students at a university in Serbia concerning their learning in the official and unofficial setting [18]. In the formal setting, the result showed that students experienced the same learning pattern such as reading aloud and translating passage, learning new words written on the board with the Serbia translation, and pronouncing the words together. The study also pointed out the language used in the teaching and learning which was dominantly mother tongue, the interaction between students and the teacher, and the task or homework which was mostly related to reading comprehension of the text, grammar exercise, looking unconfirmed words in the dictionary, and writing the translation in the notebook. These types of learning experiences are in fact the students' stories. However, it has not communicated about what kind of learning experiences that probably help most in improving their English skills.

Every student is unique and learns from experience to reflect and to achieve another skill. They have stories of how they acquire English language and improve its proficiency. It is mostly unseen except to their teacher or family who supports the development of learning. In this study, the researchers want to explore the stories of students' learning experiences and see through their stories about kinds of learning experiences which contribute most to the improvement of their language skills.

Methods

Research design

This research employed narrative inquiry as the method to elicit the participants' stories. The use of narrative, according to Barkhuizen et al., is not something new in a research field. In the context of language teaching and learning

research, narrative research aims to recount learner's experience of his language learning history [22].

Participants

Four out of thirty grade-10th students in the English as Supplementary (Reading & Writing) class at one of Demonstration Schools in Lopburi Thailand participated in this study. The criteria for selecting the participants were a) active in the classroom, b) able to communicate in English, and c) willing to be a participant.

Procedure

In conducting this study, the researchers followed a procedure suggested by Creswell [23]. He mentioned that it was not a rigid procedure to follow; instead, it can be adjusted according to the context of the study. The stages are as follows:

- 1) Identify the phenomenon to explore that addresses an educational problem
- 2) Select one or more participants to study
- 3) Collect stories from the participants
- 4) Retell the participants' stories
- 5) Collaborative with the participant-story teller
- 6) Report finding of the participants' experience
- 7) Validate the report's accuracy

Data Collection

The data in this study were collected through observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The researchers conducted two phases of interview. The first interview was done while the researcher was in Thailand and the second interview was done through social media. The two phases interview cover: (a) students' prior learning experiences and (b) students' current learning experiences. To get more understanding of the data, an interview was also conducted with the teacher who taught English as supplementary (Reading & Writing) class.

Data Analysis

The data were coded and analyzed through thematic analysis. Barkhuizen et al. identified that thematic analysis included a repeated reading of data, coding and categorization of data extract, and reorganizing under thematic headings [22]. In the beginning, themes were created from the research questions; however, the researchers have to move back and forth between the data, its codes, and categorized form to develop themes and theoretical relationships.

Results and Discussion

The first finding revealed that there were 22

learning experiences attained by Thai students during English as a Supplementary (reading & writing) class. It consisted of eleven learning experiences for reading, two learning experiences for writing, and nine learning experiences for oth-

er skills. These learning experiences were attained from the activities that students performed in the classroom. The activities and the students' learning experiences can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Students' learning experiences in the ESL class

Language	Learning Activity	Students' Learning Experience
Reading	Reading and translation	1. Collaborating with friends 2. Working in a group 3. Guessing the meaning of words
	Reading fiction	4. Knowing more vocabularies 5. Becoming enthusiastic 6. Getting reading awareness 7. Learning to write a short story
	Reading comprehension	8. Answering questions 9. Understanding the main idea of a passage 10. Having conversation/discussion of a topic 11. Concluding or summarizing
Writing	Writing practice	12. Writing short sentences 13. Simple grammar practice
Other skills	Mini speaking test	14. Asking questions to get points
	Speaking of a topic	15. Preparing a speech
	Listening to a teacher talking	16. The language used in the classroom 17. Random calling
	Listening to various media	18. Listening for detail 19. Learning difficult vocabularies 20. Learning expression from the movie
	Games	21. Knowing more vocabularies 22. Reading and thinking fast

There were nine activities in the English as a Supplementary (ES) class. Activities for reading comprised reading and translation, reading fiction, and reading comprehension; activity for writing was writing practice; and activities for other skills including mini speaking test, speaking of a topic, listening to a teacher talking, listening to various media, and games. Three activities from the list, which include *reading and translation*; *reading comprehension*; and *listening to a teacher talking*, similarly happened in Serbian EFL secondary classroom [18]. Serbian students who were taking the major of English teacher reflected that they experienced the same learning pattern in high school such as 1) the teacher would give a text to be read aloud and translated, 2) the language used in the teaching and learning was dominantly mother tongue, and 3) task and homework included reading comprehension

from the text, grammar, and looking unconfirmed words and writing the translation in the textbook.

The similarities in translation activity indicated that the use of translation might not be avoided in language teaching, especially in the EFL context [24]. Another similar finding which occurred was the dominant use of mother tongue for teaching and learning. In Matic's study, it was not stated whether the students had a negative or positive view toward this point. Meanwhile, based on the result of this current study, the participants argued that they preferred to use English all the time in the teaching and learning process.

The second finding revealed that the most helpful learning activities in improving English skills according to the students' percep-

tions were 1) reading fiction, 2) watching movies, and 3) reading and translation.

Two participants voiced in the interview that reading fiction was very helpful in improving their reading skills. Student RP, for example, described her perception as follows:

"I think I improve my reading skill more than other skills because in the classroom we have to read a lot in English subject we have a story about Pocahontas and have the test at the end of the semester." (Interview with student RP, 2019)

Reading fiction, as one of the most helpful activity, appeared to be enjoyable and flexible. Three participants mentioned that reading the story of Pocahontas helped them in improving vocabulary, reading skill, as well as interest in reading. They favored themes that interest them in reading. It is corresponding with Slater's statement in Khan and Alasmari that short stories as a literary text in the classroom are favorable because of its short length, the clarity and simplicity, its different tastes and interests, and its vast and varied topics [25]. Besides reading fiction, watching movies appeared to be another activity that helped the students' skill improvement. Student PT talked about her experience of watching a movie with subtitle in the ES class. There, she got an improvement in listening skill and vocabulary.

"For me the interesting things that we have learned about English is in Ajarn (teacher) P class because in that day we have to watch the movie with subtitle, so I think my English skill get better about listening and vocab because I can listen about so many words and I almost know it and understand what they talked about, what the story about. So and I can understand the whole story." (Interview with student PT, 2019)

The activity of watching movies in the classroom happened infrequently. There, the students continued to watch the movie at home. They usually repeated the movie they have watched as part of learning. The students' attempt to repeat the movie to understand it better indicated that it was a challenging yet fun activity to do.

"I think my listening skill is better because first when I listened to Ajarn (teacher) P in the classroom, I often don't understand and when I go to home, we will watch, I learn and I practice every day and I think watching movie can help too I know the vocabulary that I don't know and I learn it two or three times and

sometimes I opened the subtitles in Thai, but when I understand it, I don't open subtitle I watch it in English language." (Interview with student PC, 2019)

A similar situation happened in a study by Lai [26] that EFL undergraduate students created learning experiences outside the classroom such as watching movies and listening to songs to enliven in-class learning and as a response to the limitation of the in-class learning.

The third activity which appeared to be very helpful based on the students' perceptions was reading and translation. Besides, it provided more vocabulary knowledge, this activity provided group work experience. As experienced by student TN which was expressed in her short answer, working in any group helped her much to learn English better.

R : "Which activity that you think helps you most in the classroom in improving your English skills?"

TN : "Work in group"

R : "Working on? The translation one?"

TN : "Yes and game"

(Interview with student TN, 2018)

Working in a group also allowed the students to help each other. Besides, it reduced the anxiety of learning.

"Because, because work in group, we can help each other. If I do by myself, it's like so much pressure. So much pressure, so it's easier to work with friends." (Interview with student PT, 2018)

The following table (Table 2) shows the most promoting learning activities in the ES class to the area of improvement of students' language skills. It was found that learning experiences obtained by the students from the most helpful activities were (LE 4) knowing more vocabularies, (LE 6) getting reading awareness, (LE 7) learning to write a short story, (LE 18) learning difficult vocabularies, (LE 20) learning expression from movies, (LE 1) collaborating with friends, (LE 2) working in a group, and (LE 3) guessing the meaning of words. From these learning experiences, students benefited in the skill of reading, listening, writing, as well as the language element of vocabularies.

In addition, the learning situation suggested from the students' point of view were those which are fun, flexible, autonomous, longer time, entertaining, challenging, non-threatening,

Table 2. The most promoting learning activity in the ES class in the improvement of language skills

	R	W	S	L	V	G	P	Learning Situation
<i>Reading Fiction:</i> LE 4. Knowing more vocabularies LE 6. Getting reading awareness	√	√	-	-	√	-	-	Fun, flexible, autonomous, longer time
<i>Watching movies:</i> LE 18. Learning difficult vocabularies LE 20. Learning expression from	-	-	-	√	√	-	-	Fun, entertaining, autonomous, challenging
<i>Reading and translation</i> LE 1. Collaborating with friends LE 2. Working in a group LE 3. Guessing the meaning of words	√	√	-	-	√	-	-	Non-threatening, involve interaction, group work

R: reading, W: writing, S: speaking, L: listening, V: vocabulary, G: grammar, P: pronunciation

involve interaction, and group work. This result was corresponding with Dunlap and Lowenthal's study about engaging teaching and learning. They mentioned that engaging learning experience was learner-centered, contextual, active, social, and supportive [15]. Learning experiences which were learner-centered (group work), active (autonomous, challenging), social (involve interactions), and supportive (non-threatening, fun, entertaining, flexible, longer time) were the points which the students wanted to exhibit from their stories.

Meanwhile, the contextual theme has not been fully exhibited from their stories. It may be because the students were at the beginning of the secondary level (grade 10) in which they still learned simple things. Thus the case was different

from that in Dunlap and Lowenthal because the participants were undergraduate students.

From the participants' stories, although they acquire the same learning activity in the classroom, the improvement of their skills was on a different level and different aspect. Student RP said that her improvement was on reading skill, student PT was on vocabulary and listening, and student TN and PC were on listening skill. However, they shared a similar opinion on several learning experiences that they perceived to be important in improving their English skills.

Based on participants' stories, the most helpful learning activity or task in the classroom were providing at least three learning experiences namely 1) knowing more vocabularies, 2) work-

Table 3. Essential learning experiences for students

Essential learning experiences	Learning Activity in the ES	Learning situation
LE 4, LE 19, LE 21	Reading Fiction	Fun, flexible, autonomous, longer
Knowing more vocabularies	Watching movies	Fun, entertaining, not-tense (relaxed),
	Reading and Translation	Involve interaction, non-threatening
	Vocabulary Games	Fun, challenging, group work
LE 2, LE 21 Working in a group	Reading and Translation	Involve interaction, non-threatening, group work
*Using English to communicate (Past learning experience)	-	Not-tense (relaxed), active, involve interaction

ing in a group, and 3) using English to communicate. It can be seen in table 3.

These experiences were important for students to improve their English skills. Vocabulary, as admitted by the students in the interview, was a big issue for them. As well as by the interview, some of them couldn't communicate well because they still have limited knowledge in vocabularies. Therefore, activities which provided an easy way to know more vocabularies were very helpful. This experience can be found in several activities such as reading a short story, listening to various media, reading and translation, and some vocabulary games.

The participants' stories also indicated that working in a group was a valuable experience. It was admitted by the students who said that they could help each other by working in a group so that everybody got less pressure. They could also share their thoughts on deciding which translation was more proper. This result is corresponding with Matic in which students thought that "it was easier to work on a smaller group". Students perceive that they obtain more knowledge in a far exciting way in a smaller group [18].

The third significant learning experience was using English to communicate. Three of the participants said that they were happy in the classroom when they could share and speak in English. However, the ES class did not offer much exposure to this learning experience since the focus was on reading and writing. They wished the teacher used more English to communicate and more than to take it as an exam. The students also mentioned the benefits of communicating using English languages. Some of them told about their experience in primary school, which was very helpful until today was using English at any time in the classroom with the teacher. They wanted to use English every time they study, including when having interaction with the teacher.

Similarly, the same situation happened in Rao that EFL Chinese students wanted the teacher to use English whenever could [17]. In Rao's case, the subjects were newly introduced to CLT. Similarly, in Thailand, it may happen because CLT was introduced with the focus on teaching English for communication [6].

Narrative inquiry in this study captured the language learning experiences of individuals. Studying learning experiences which promote the students' language skill improvement is essential for English teachers to select or plan best learning experiences. This study proves that the improvement of students' language skills resulted from

learning experiences students had attained.

Students' perceptions showed that promoting learning experience in reading and writing class carried at least two essential items comprising vocabulary and group work. It was essential to draw attention to vocabularies since most EFL students were struggling with vocabulary's improvement. Besides, the group work helped the students reducing anxiety and pressure during the learning process. These learning experiences were essential to be included in lesson planning.

However, the learning experiences of each student might be different depending on how the learning situation suits them. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to plan a significant learning experience for the students as well as to create a supportive learning situation. Those planned learning experiences are realized in the activities students carry out in the classroom or outside the classroom.

Conclusion

From 22 learning experiences that Thai students have attained in the ES class, there were eight experiences resulted from the most promoting activities. Those learning experiences were (1) knowing more vocabularies, (2) getting reading awareness, (3) learning to write a short story, (4) learning difficult vocabularies, (5) learning expression from movies, (6) collaborating with friends, (7) working in a group, and (8) guessing the meaning of words. These learning experiences attained from doing activities such as reading fiction, watching movies, and reading and translation. By these activities, the students admitted that they got an improvement on some skills such as reading, listening, and vocabularies.

The most helpful learning activity or task in the ES class was providing at least two learning experiences, namely 1) knowing more vocabularies and 2) working in a group. Besides, the students also wanted the teacher to use English every time they studied as part of communicative activity. It showed that communicating in English was one of the important learning experiences that students wish to have.

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