

The Use of English in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Context: A Study of ASEAN International Students at a Thai University*

การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในบริบทที่ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษากลาง: กรณีศึกษานักศึกษาต่างชาติในกลุ่มประเทศอาเซียนที่ศึกษาอยู่ ณ มหาวิทยาลัยในประเทศไทย

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Abstract

The number of study abroad programs is growing in the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Within these programs English is serving as a lingua franca. However, there have been few studies that have examined this emerging linguistic terrain. In particular, while many ASEAN study abroad programs state that English is used as the lingua franca, little, if anything, is known about what that usage entails.

The study reported on in this article attempted to begin to address this by investigating how often and for what purposes English was used in the lives of 55 ASEAN international students participating in a study abroad program at a Thai university. The study examined the role of English in the students' lives, both inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, the study attempted to determine what effect, if any, this usage had on students' anxiety about using English. Findings showed that the participants used English frequently and extensively for both academic and social purposes during their time in Thailand. Students also reported having lower levels of anxiety about using English after a year or more of studying in

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นักศึกษานิเทศศาสตร์ สาขาการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษานานาชาติ ภาควิชาภาษาและภาษาศาสตร์ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตหาดใหญ่

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Thailand. These findings have significance for students who are considering participating in a study abroad program in which English serves as the lingua franca and those interested in having a better understanding of how English as a lingua franca functions within such programs.

Keywords: Study abroad; English as a lingua franca (ELF); ASEAN

Introduction

The term *study abroad* is used to refer to a short or long-term educational program conducted in a foreign country in which the students are awarded credits to fulfill degree requirements in their home educational institution. In some cases, the term refers to or includes the pursuance of a full degree at an overseas university. There are several forms, levels and lengths of study abroad programs (Education Abroad Glossary, 2010; Ballah, 2013).

Study abroad programs have played an increasingly larger role in the lives of students around the world (Dwyer, 2009). This is also true in Asia where there has been a concentrated effort to encourage student mobility within the region. This effort can be seen through the establishment of regional student mobility programs such as the student mobility program established by the Great Mekong Sub-region (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and China) together with Korea and Japan, the Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand Student Mobility Program (MIT) and the ASEAN University Network (AUN) (Hepworth, 2010; Hénard, Bonichon, Maulana, Iqbal, & Oratmangun, 2016; "The AUN's Strategic Focus," 2016).

An emphasis on studying abroad can also be seen in the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) where, in the last five years, the number of international students studying in neighboring ASEAN countries has increased ("ASEAN Poised to Usher," 2014; Hénard, et al., 2016). The ASEAN member country of Thailand has played an active role in encouraging student mobility and study abroad in an effort to foster regional development. To this end, steps have been taken to (1) promote one-structured education systems in the region; (2) create a common credit transfer system; (3) conduct joint research projects; (4) reinforce the current cooperative network amid higher institutions in ASEAN; (5) enhance the quantity and quality of human resources and (6) encourage collaboration among academics, researchers and scholars in all member countries of ASEAN (Hepworth, 2010; Hénard, et al., 2016; "The AUN's Strategic Focus," 2016).

English has long acted as a medium of instruction in many study abroad programs and served as a shared communicative language among study abroad students (Kaypak & Ortactepe, 2014). This is especially true in study abroad programs in the member countries of

ASEAN, an association in which English was declared the official language (Kirkpatrick, 2010) and, consequently, where fluency in English is widely promoted. So it is believed that a study abroad experience in an English as a lingua franca country might serve to better position international students within a global context, particularly when returning to work in their ASEAN home countries, which is increasingly relying on English.

Study Abroad in an ELF Context

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is defined as a contact language used to communicate among non-native English speakers having different native languages and different cultures (Firth, 1996). Seidlhofer (2011) asserts that the term ELF denotes a linguistic environment in which English is used for communication by speakers of different mother tongues and usually in environments in which English is the only shared language. Jenkins (2009) argues that native speakers of English are often also part of an ELF community.

The number of students who are studying abroad in ASEAN ELF contexts has been growing, yet there has been little research on these contexts. The research that does exist suggests that such an experience can help students develop a better attitude toward their English use. For instance, Baker (2009) and Kaypak and Ortactepe (2014) reported that a study abroad experience in an ELF context enabled international students to develop a better attitude toward English use with regards to their cross-cultural communications in English. Specifically, after having studied abroad, students had a better understanding of the importance of fluency and reported feeling less worried and more relaxed when using English. Additionally, as a result of their experience abroad, the students reported they were now more willing to use the language so as to communicate more effectively. Virkkula and Nikula (2010) reported a similar impact. These authors found that after studying abroad in an ELF context, students were more motivated to speak. The participants also reported that emotional obstacles, i.e. worries about grammatical correctness and the ability to maintain good communication, were reduced, resulting in a more optimistic view about their ability to be successful in language learning. In summary, the findings from each of the aforementioned studies suggest that these changes in students' attitudes led to their becoming more competent and self-confident speakers of English, and that these changes could be attributed to the fact that their interlocutors were also non-native speakers of English. Because of the latter, students felt less self-conscious and more willing to use the language.

Rationale and Research Questions

As has been previously stated, in ASEAN countries such as Thailand, universities are encouraging students from neighboring countries to study in their countries and many students are doing just that. These programs inform students that English will be used as a lingua franca during their studies. What is not at all clear, however, is the extent to which English is actually used within these study abroad contexts. In the Thai context, this is especially important to know given the abundance of literature documenting Thai's struggle with using English (Baker, 2008, 2012; Foley, 2005; Bruner, Sinwongsuwat, & Shimray, 2014; Khamkhien, 2010; Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2003; Kongnin & Sinwongsuwat, 2016). Determining how much English is used and for what purposes will provide some much needed specifics in terms of actually defining and understanding what is meant when universities use the term ELF in their study abroad programs.

In addition to trying to determine how often English was used and for what purposes, this study looked at the effects of this usage on students' perceptions of and attitudes toward English. Findings on various aspects will be discussed in future articles, but in this article the authors share findings about one aspect of students' attitudes and that is students' anxiety around using English. While a review of the literature suggests that a study abroad experience can have a positive impact on students' attitudes, the researchers were especially interested in the effects on anxiety, as a substantial amount of research on second language learning (Krashen, 2009; MacIntyre, 2007; Khaldieh, 2000; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) points to the critical role anxiety can play. In particular, the researchers wanted to assess whether the ELF study abroad experience could lower students' anxiety levels around using English. Consequently, the research questions reported on in this article were:

1. For non-native English speaking students studying in an ELF country, how often is English used and for what purposes?
2. What impact, if any, does this study abroad experience have on students' anxiety about using English?

Research Methodology

1. Participants

Fifty-five graduate students (26 male and 29 female) from six ASEAN countries including Cambodia (n=14), Indonesia (n=18), Laos (n=1), Myanmar (n=10), Philippines (n=3) and Vietnam (n=9) who were studying at Prince of Songkla University (PSU) Hat Yai Campus, Thailand, were selected using purposive sampling. These students were selected from an

overall population of 217 graduate students at PSU. All participants were from ASEAN member nations and all had been in Thailand for more than one year. The latter criterion was established so that the participants would have enough overseas experience to answer the questions asked.

Studying at 12 different faculties (in the fields of the sciences and social sciences), 39 participants were Master students, and 16 were Ph.D. students. Their ages ranged from 23 to 58 with an average age of 30. The participants were enrolled in three different study plans, 37 in Plan A1 (research only), 17 in Plan A2 (research and coursework) and 1 in Plan B (coursework only). Thirty-six participants (65.45%) had been in Thailand for 12-18 months; seven (12.73%), 19-25 months; nine (16.36%), 26-32 months and three (5.45%), over 36 months.

The participants chose Thailand as their study destination for five main reasons. The first reason was reported to be the availability of scholarships. The second was an interest in experiencing life in another country, followed by the quality of the Thai educational system and the inexpensive cost of living in Thailand. The least important reason cited was an interest in working in Thailand after graduation.

2. Instrument and Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires were used as the means of data collection. The first section (15 items) solicited participants' demographic information and general information about their lives in Thailand as it related to English use. The second section (34 items) pertained to participants' frequency of and purposes for using English in Thailand. This section also solicited information about the use of English in students' courses and their perceptions of their English proficiency and anxiety levels about using English before coming to Thailand and after at least one year in Thailand.

Types of items in the questionnaire included five-point Likert scales, multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was drafted by the researcher and then evaluated by a panel of three experts from the Faculty of Liberal Arts at PSU. Recommendations for revisions of some questionnaire items were made. The questionnaire was revised accordingly and checked by the panel a second time and additional revisions were then made. Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC) was calculated on the final revised questionnaire to check validity. The questionnaire was found to have a high level of validity (IOC = 0.904).

To ensure reliability, the questionnaires were piloted with ten students who were selected using the same criteria as those in the final study. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaires was calculated and showed that the questionnaires were highly reliable, with

an overall reliability of 0.977. Based on comments and suggestions from pilot study participants, minor revisions to the questionnaire were made.

Fifty-five sets of printed questionnaires were distributed directly by the researcher to the participants in the months of September and November 2016. The return rate was 100%.

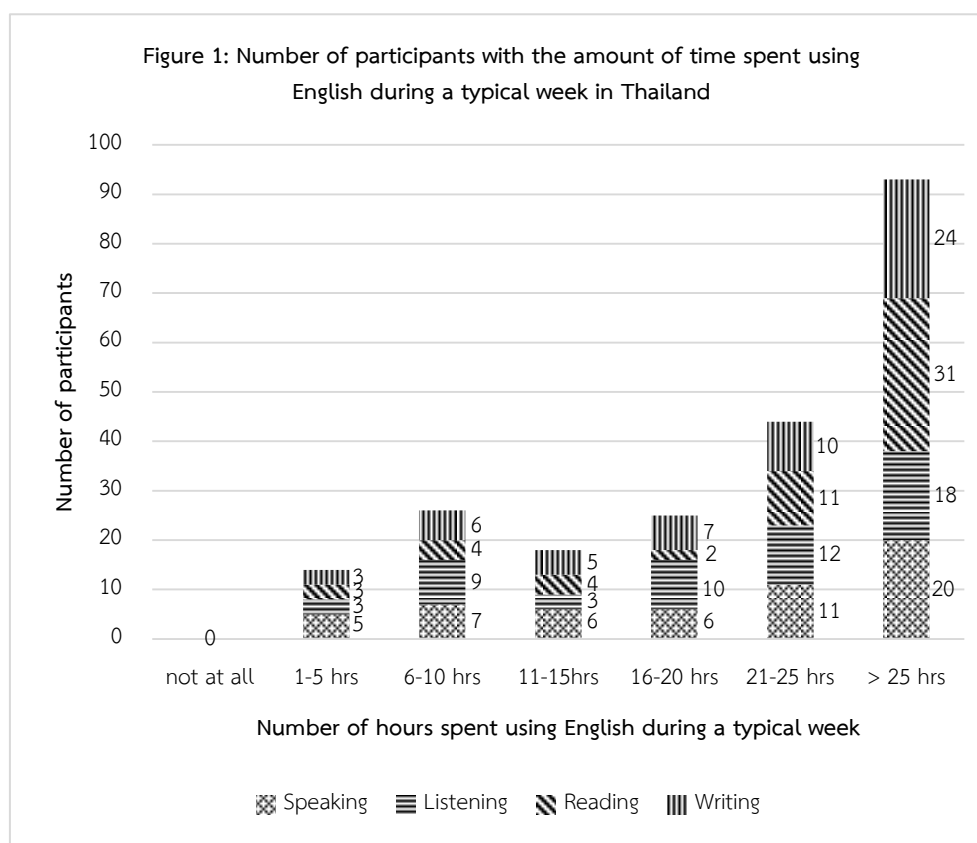
3. Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were first coded using Microsoft Excel and then imported to SPSS 17 and analyzed quantitatively. A descriptive statistical analysis was performed to identify answers to the research questions. A quantitative method was applied to analyze frequency, means, percentages and standard deviation of students' demographic information, amount of time they spent using English and activities in which they did so, their anxiety about using English and their perceived English proficiency. To see if there was a significant difference between their past and current anxiety as well as perceived English proficiency levels, t-tests were also performed.

Findings

1. Frequency and Purposes of Using English

Answers to both research questions were acquired from the quantitative data analysis. Regarding research question 1, participants reported that during their time in Thailand, they had the opportunity to use English frequently for a number of academic and social purposes. Figure 1 indicates that during their studies abroad many participants used English (in all four areas – reading, writing, listening and speaking) for more than 25 hours during a typical week.



As illustrated in Figure 1, among the 55 participants there was a small number who used just a little English, five hours or less per week. Five participants reportedly spoke English in Thailand for 1-5 hours. And only three listened to, read and wrote in English for 1-5 hours during a typical week. In contrast, a large number of participants used English in Thailand very frequently during a typical week. Twenty reported speaking English for over 25 hours while 18 listened to English for over 25 hours. For those who read in English for over 25 hours, there were up to 31 participants. Twenty-four participants reported spending more than 25 hours per week writing in English.

1.1. The Use of English for Academic Purposes

Participants reported using English in all aspects of their academic lives. The vast majority of class lectures were given in English as were classroom discussions. Course materials were written in English. Additionally, participants reported needing their English skills to communicate with their advisors, read journal articles/books and write research papers. English was also needed to complete written assignments and exams. Theses (including proposals) and academic articles for publications also needed to be written in English.

Table 1: Academic activities in which the participants used English in Thailand

Activities	5 (always)	4 (usually)	3 (sometimes)	2 (rarely)	1 (never)
1. communicating with advisors	46 (83.64%)	4 (7.27%)	4 (7.27%)	0	1 (1.82%)
2. reading journal articles/books	46 (83.64%)	5 (9.09%)	2 (3.64%)	1 (1.82%)	1 (1.82%)
3. writing research proposals/research papers	47 (85.45%)	3 (5.45%)	2 (3.64%)	2 (3.64%)	1 (1.82%)
4. communicating in class	33 (60.00%)	15 (27.27%)	7 (12.73%)	0	0
5. listening to lectures	34 (61.82%)	10 (18.18%)	8 (14.55%)	2 (3.64%)	1 (1.82%)
6. writing homework/assignments	42 (76.36%)	8 (14.55%)	3 (5.45%)	0	2 (3.64%)
7. completing exams	40 (72.73%)	9 (16.36%)	3 (5.45%)	1 (1.82%)	2 (3.64%)

As table 1 shows, up to 47 participants (85.45%) reported always using English to write proposals/research papers. And 46 participants (83.64%) reported always using English to communicate with their advisors. The same number of participants reported relying entirely on English to read journal articles/books. In the same way, there was a large number of participants who always used English for the rest of the academic purposes while very few (from 1 to 8) reported not using English frequently (sometimes, rarely and never). Therefore, even though sometimes Thai was used in these students' academic situations, English was still used more widely.

1.2. The Use of English for Social Purposes

While participants reported using English frequently for academic purposes, they also reported using it extensively in their social lives. As shown in table 2, English was frequently used in a range of activities.

Table 2: English used in the participants' free time activities

	Activities	% of time English Used
1	using social media such as Facebook, LINE, Instagram, etc.	94.55%
2	participating in activities organized by faculties or PSU student groups	94.34%
3	watching TV shows/YouTube	92.45%
4	going shopping	84.91%
5	hanging out with friends	83.33%
6	playing sports	77.78%
7	participating in religious activities	67.39%

Participants depended on English to participate in social activities. Among those activities, the participants most frequently used English when using social media and participating in activities organized by faculties or university student groups. Although used least frequently than in other activities, English was still needed 67.39% of the time when participating in religious activities. Additionally, while participants reported that their pool of friends largely consisted of those who shared their mother tongue, many had friends who were international students and, therefore, English was needed to establish and maintain these relationships.

2. Participants' Anxiety about Using English

As previously noted, some studies have found that using English in an ELF context positively affected international students' attitudes toward their English use. With an aim to explore whether the Thai ELF context is helpful in the same way for ASEAN international students, the present study also looked at the impact of study abroad experience on students' anxiety. Therefore, participants were asked to reflect on their anxiety about using English before coming to Thailand and after having studied in the Thai ELF context for at least one year.

When using English in Thailand, they reported having less anxiety than they had previous to their arrival in Thailand. As presented in table 3, based on a five-point Likert scale – 5=very high, 4=high, 3=moderate, 2=a little and 1=none, participants' actual anxiety decreased in all areas, with a significant decrease in the areas of speaking and reading. Participants' overall actual anxiety was quite low – in between moderate and a little.

Table 3: Participants' reported change in anxiety levels about using English

Areas	Anxiety before arriving in Thailand		Anxiety after at least one year in Thailand		t	d.f.	Sig. (2-tailed)
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.			
Speaking	2.91	1.09	2.58	1.08	2.100*	54	0.04
Listening	2.91	0.99	2.64	1.16	1.695	54	0.10
Reading	2.75	1.09	2.42	1.17	2.194*	54	0.03
Writing	2.84	1.08	2.56	1.17	1.817	54	0.07

* Significant at 0.05 level

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to capture how English was actually operating within an ASEAN-based study abroad context, particularly how often and for what purposes it was used by the ASEAN international students. The findings revealed that participants found themselves having to use English on a daily basis for both academic and social purposes.

In their academic lives, students relied on English to talk with professors, advisors, and classmates, understand lectures and assigned readings and complete written assignments, including theses. Although some of their professors and Thai classmates occasionally used Thai in the classroom, academic success was firmly rooted in students' ability to navigate in English.

Participants' use of English was not restricted to their academic lives. With only one participant considering himself proficient in Thai, English was, with few exceptions, the language used in participants' social lives. In this way, as asserted by Nomnian (2014), such contact with non-native speakers of English is also helpful for enhancing students' communication in English.

This English immersion appeared to have less anxiety when using English. Participants reported being more competent in English and experiencing less anxiety about using it. This finding aligns with what Baker (2009) and Kaypak and Ortactepe (2014) found about students' feelings and perceptions about the use of language in ELF contexts, and Virkkula's and Nikula's (2010) findings that using English with ELF speakers might make the study abroad students feel less anxious and more confident using the language.

Findings from this study provide a glimpse into how English is operating within this Thai ELF university context. They suggest that even though English is not the native language of the country, students will have ample opportunities to use English and that this use may result in students feeling less anxious about using English and therefore more willing and able to do so. Future studies that investigate other benefits of studying in an ELF context are recommended.

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