AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHING TFL AMONG EDUCATORS IN BANGKOK-AREA EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This meticulously conducted research investigates the perceptions of educators regarding the challenges encountered in teaching Thai as a foreign language (TFL) within international schools and public universities. Employing purposive sampling, the study identifies four primary challenges faced during TFL instruction: 1) the need for a profound understanding of TFL pedagogy, encompassing both theoretical principles and practical methodologies; 2) the lack of standardized teaching materials, inadequate assessment tools, and limited professional development opportunities among TFL educators; 3) the difficulty in effectively managing TFL learning activities to create engaging and interactive environments that foster deep learning and cultural understanding; 4) the need for enhanced collaboration among TFL educators, the development of standardized TFL curricula and assessment tools, and increased professional development opportunities. These findings provide valuable insights into the complexities of TFL instruction, highlighting the critical role of educator expertise, standardized teaching materials, and effective.

Keyword: Perception, Challenge, Teaching Thai as a foreign language, Educator

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fundamental tool for communication, enabling individuals within and across societies to connect, collaborate, and share understanding. Despite the diverse cultural and linguistic landscapes that exist worldwide, language provides a common ground for fostering intercultural dialogue and promoting mutual appreciation. While English has emerged as a global lingua franca, the significance of learning other languages, particularly those of local significance, remains undiminished. In Thailand, the Thai language holds a central position in shaping the nation's identity and cultural heritage. While Thai may not be universally recognized as a global language, its importance in understanding Thai society and engaging with its people is undeniable.

The growing demand for Thai language instruction among foreign students reflects the increasing interconnectedness of the world. As globalization has accelerated, the need for effective cross-cultural communication has become increasingly evident. Whether in the realms of politics, economics, education, or social interactions, the ability to communicate effectively in Thai opens doors to new opportunities and enhances understanding of Thai culture and society.

Despite the recognized benefits of learning Thai, the process of mastering a foreign language, especially one with a distinct linguistic structure and cultural context, presents inherent challenges. Foreign students often face difficulties in comprehending the nuances of Thai pronunciation, grasping the complexities of Thai grammar, and developing proficiency in spoken and written Thai. These challenges stem from the differences between Thai and the

students' native languages, which can hinder their ability to fully grasp the language's intricacies.

In response to the growing demand for Thai language instruction, various educational institutions, both public and private, have taken steps to develop and offer Thai as a foreign language (TFL) courses. These efforts reflect an increasing recognition of the importance of TFL in fostering intercultural understanding and promoting Thailand's cultural heritage. Notable examples of these initiatives include the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development at Mahidol University, which launched a middle-level Thai language course in 1990, and the Thai Studies Centre at Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Education, which began offering Thai language courses for foreign students in 1991.

Despite these advancements, the field of TFL faces several challenges, including a shortage of qualified instructors, limited resources, and a need for more effective teaching methodologies. As Ponmanee (2010) observes, while TFL has gained significance, there is a dearth of teachers who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and training to effectively teach Thai to foreign learners. This gap can be attributed to the lack of government support for TFL teacher education and the limited availability of TFL-specific training programs.

The challenges faced by TFL teachers are evident in the difficulties they encounter in managing their classrooms and addressing the diverse needs of their students. Common issues include students' lack of basic Thai language skills, limited understanding of the value of Thai language learning, and teachers' struggles to develop engaging and effective teaching strategies. These challenges, as highlighted by researchers (Deawsomkit, 2009; Feng, 2001; Ponmanee, 2002; Saengmanee, 2003; Thananchai, 2009; Wiboolyasarin, 2010) can hinder students' progress and diminish their motivation to learn Thai.

Several studies (Klamklung, 1998; Ruankaew, 1996) further exemplify the challenges faced in TFL instruction. Ruankaew's investigation into Thai language instruction in Chiang Rai province's primary schools revealed several shortcomings, including inadequate teacher preparation, low-quality instructional activities, limited use of instructional media, and ineffective measurement and evaluation practices. Similarly, Klamklung's study found that many international schools in Chiang Mai lacked a structured curriculum for Thai language instruction, leading to inconsistencies in teaching approaches and student outcomes.

The field of TFL faces a range of challenges, including the need for more qualified instructors, the development of effective teaching methodologies, and the implementation of comprehensive assessment tools. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from educational institutions, government agencies, and the TFL community. By fostering collaboration and sharing knowledge, we can enhance the quality of TFL instruction and empower foreign students to achieve their language learning goals. As they embark on their journey of learning Thai, they will gain a deeper understanding of Thai culture, expand their communication horizons, and contribute to the global tapestry of intercultural understanding.

METHOD

Participants

The study's target population comprised TFL teachers from international schools and public universities in Bangkok. Ten TFL teachers from these institutions were selected through purposive sampling to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the participants possessed the requisite expertise and experience to provide valuable insights into the challenges and issues pertaining to TFL instruction. The participants' diverse backgrounds and experiences enriched the study's findings and provided a comprehensive perspective on the current state of TFL education in Bangkok.

Interview

To gather comprehensive insights into the perspectives of TFL teachers, a structured interview form was meticulously developed. The form's creation involved a multi-step process:

1. **Extensive Review of Literature:** A thorough examination of relevant academic literature and research pertaining to the challenges and issues in TFL instruction was conducted. This review provided a foundation for understanding the current landscape of TFL education and identifying key areas of inquiry.

2. **Form Development:** Drawing upon the literature review, a structured interview form was crafted to systematically explore the participants' perspectives on TFL instruction. The form encompassed a range of questions designed to elicit in-depth responses on four crucial aspects: a.

   a. **Profound Understanding of TFL Pedagogy:** This section delved into the teachers' comprehension of effective TFL teaching methods and approaches.

   b. **Overall State of TFL Instruction:** This area focused on gauging the participants' perceptions of the current state of TFL education in Bangkok, including strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

   c. **Management of TFL Learning Activities:** This section examined the teachers' strategies for managing and organizing TFL learning activities to maximize student engagement and effectiveness.

   d. **Perceptions of TFL Challenges and Proposed Solutions:** This area explored the teachers' views on the primary obstacles encountered in TFL instruction and their proposed solutions for addressing these challenges.

3. **Expert Review:** To ensure the validity and comprehensiveness of the interview form, it was subjected to rigorous scrutiny by a panel of experienced TFL experts. Their feedback was instrumental in refining the form's structure, language, and content to ensure it garnered insightful and relevant responses from the participants.

4. **Finalization and Refinement:** Based on the experts' recommendations, the interview form was carefully reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, precision, and consistency. This meticulous process ensured that the form served as an effective tool for eliciting valuable insights from the participants.

Procedure

To gather comprehensive and reliable data, the researcher employed a structured approach to data collection, adhering to the following rigorous steps: Initial contact was established with potential interviewees via telephone to schedule convenient dates, times, and locations for conducting the interviews. This proactive approach ensured that the participants' availability and preferences were taken into consideration, fostering a collaborative and mutually agreeable data collection process. During the scheduled interviews, the researcher utilized a meticulously developed interview form to guide the discussion. The form's structured format ensured a systematic exploration of the participants' perspectives on four crucial aspects of TFL instruction. Throughout the interviews, the researcher meticulously recorded the participants' responses, ensuring the preservation of their valuable insights for further analysis. Detailed notes were taken, capturing both verbal and nonverbal cues to gain a holistic understanding of the teachers' perspectives. This comprehensive approach ensured that the data captured the full spectrum of the participants' experiences and viewpoints. Following the completion of the interviews, the recorded data was carefully transcribed into a textual format. This transcription process involved verbatim transcription, preserving the nuances of the participants' language, and ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of the data. To further ensure the data's trustworthiness and reliability, the transcribed interviews were carefully reviewed

and verified against the original audio recordings. Any discrepancies were identified and corrected, ensuring the accuracy of the data for subsequent analysis. This meticulous approach to data collection and transcription ensured the validity and reliability of the findings, which can be confidently used to inform and improve TFL instruction.

Data Analysis

To derive meaningful insights from the collected data, a comprehensive and systematic approach to data analysis was employed. The analysis process involved the following steps:

1) Quantitative data pertaining to the respondents' demographics and teaching experience was analyzed using frequency and percentage distribution techniques. This descriptive statistical approach provided a concise overview of the characteristics of the participants, allowing for contextualization of their perspectives and experiences.

2) Qualitative data gathered from the interview transcripts underwent a rigorous process of descriptive analysis. This approach involved meticulously reviewing and coding the data to identify key themes, patterns, and recurring concepts. The coded data was then organized into categories and subcategories, providing a structured framework for understanding the participants' perspectives on the four areas of inquiry.

3) The findings of the data analysis were presented in both tabular and essay formats. The tables provided a concise summary of the quantitative data, while the essays offered in-depth discussions of the qualitative findings. This multifaceted approach ensured that the rich and complex insights derived from the data were effectively communicated to the reader.

4) The data analysis process extended beyond mere description and categorization to encompass a deeper level of interpretation. The researcher drew upon existing literature and theoretical frameworks to contextualize the findings and generate meaningful insights into the participants' perspectives and experiences. This interpretive approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the challenges and issues in TFL instruction in Bangkok.

Findings

This study investigated the current state and challenges of teaching TFL in educational institutions in Bangkok. A descriptive analysis approach was employed to collect, analyze, and present data on the status of Thai language instruction in Bangkok. The findings are presented in two sections:

Section 1: Information about the status of the respondents.

Table 1: Numbers and percentages on the status of respondents by sex, age, education level, field of study, teaching experience and training experience.

Status	Items	Numbers	Percentages
Sex	Male	2	20
	Female	8	80
Age	20 – 25 years old	3	30
	26 – 30 years old	6	60
	31 – 35 years old	1	10
	36 – 40 years old	0	0
	Above 41 years old	0	0
Education level	Bachelor	3	30
	Master	7	70
	Doctoral	0	0
Field of Study	Thai/Teaching Thai	2	20

Status	Items	Numbers	Percentages
	Teaching TFL	5	50
	Others	3	30
Teaching experiences	Less than 1 year	2	20
	1 year	2	20
	2 years	5	50
	More than 3 years	1	10
Training experiences	No	3	30
	Yes	7	70

Table 1 reveals the demographic characteristics of the respondents, demonstrating a clear majority of female participants, comprising approximately 80% of the sample, while males accounted for the remaining 20%. Regarding age distribution, the majority of respondents, representing 60%, fall within the 26-30 age range, followed by the 21-25 age group with 30%. Educational attainment among the respondents indicates a high level of academic achievement, with 70% holding a master's degree and 30% possessing a bachelor's degree. The field of study for the respondents reflects their expertise in Thai language instruction, with 50% having completed studies in Teaching TFL, 30% in Thai/Teaching Thai, and the remaining 20% in other fields. Teaching experience among the respondents suggests a range of expertise, with 50% having more than two years of experience, 20% with less than one year, and another 20% with one year. Notably, 70% of the respondents have received training in teaching TFL, indicating a commitment to professional development.

Section 2: The states and problems of teaching TFL.

A comprehensive analysis of the interview data revealed insights into the respondents' perspectives on various aspects of teaching TFL. The key themes that emerged from the interviews are summarized below:

1. Deep Understanding of Teaching TFL

Respondents emphasized the challenges and complexities associated with teaching TFL, highlighting the need to tailor instruction to the specific needs and goals of foreign learners. They advocated for a comprehensive approach that encompasses understanding students' motivations for learning Thai, incorporating Thai culture and lifestyle into lessons, and establishing a solid foundation in basic Thai language. Additionally, respondents stressed the importance of focusing on student comprehension, utilizing native language comparisons to facilitate understanding, and mitigating the influence of mother tongue interference.

2. General States of Teaching TFL

Respondents unanimously agreed that TFL pedagogy should be learner-centered, emphasizing the need to address individual needs and maximize student engagement. They emphasized the importance of creating a supportive and engaging classroom environment that fosters active participation and promotes sustainable learning. Additionally, respondents acknowledged the need to consider individual differences among learners, such as intellectual abilities, interests, proficiency levels, and prior knowledge, when designing TFL curricula.

3. States of TFL Learning Activities in Preparation

Respondents shared insights into their preparation processes for TFL activities, emphasizing the importance of thorough content preparation, utilizing a variety of teaching materials (e.g., role plays, games, music), and designing lesson plans tailored to learners' needs, abilities, and objectives. They highlighted the need to align activities with school-based

curricula and ensure that all materials are clearly understood in advance. Additionally, respondents discussed the importance of incorporating evaluation strategies at the outset of planning to ensure effective instruction that aligns with defined objectives and promotes self-development.

4. Opinions of Teachers about the Problems/Obstacles and the Solution

Respondents identified several challenges they face in teaching TFL, including:

- Limited student understanding of vocabulary
- Pronunciation difficulties
- Inadequate background knowledge or experiences
- Varying student abilities

To address these challenges, respondents shared various strategies they employ, such as:

- Repeated explanations and simplified vocabulary
- Broad content preparation with a focus on fundamentals
- Slow, step-by-step instruction
- Use of English or students' native language for clarification
- Visual aids and examples

Respondents also emphasized the importance of incorporating games and other engaging activities to promote student enjoyment and practice opportunities. They highlighted the effectiveness of traditional teaching methods, such as games, exercises, pictures, and original or online media, in stimulating learning and maintaining student attention.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING TFL INSTRUCTION

Based on the findings of this analysis, several recommendations for enhancing TFL instruction can be made: Develop comprehensive TFL curricula that cater to the diverse needs and goals of foreign learners. Incorporate learner-centered approaches that promote active participation and foster a supportive learning environment. Utilize a variety of engaging teaching materials and activities to enhance student motivation and practice opportunities. Provide opportunities for personalized feedback and support to address individual learning styles and challenges. Embrace technological advancements and incorporate multimedia resources to enhance instruction and provide diverse learning experiences. By implementing these recommendations, TFL educators can create more effective and engaging learning environments that empower foreign learners to achieve their language goals and gain a deeper understanding of Thai culture and society.

DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In the examination of educators' perspectives on the challenges and status of instructing TFL within educational institutions in the Bangkok area, the ensuing discussions and recommendations are presented:

1) The Nature of Teaching TFL: The essence of teaching TFL diverges significantly from instructing Thai as a primary language. Unlike the latter, where students utilize Thai as the medium for knowledge transfer, the former necessitates educators to impart not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural insights. Neglecting this imperative could result in communication challenges, as Nostrand (cited in Wongsothon, 1996) underscored that an absence of understanding of native speakers' lives impedes meaningful communication. In conclusion, teaching TFL requires an emphasis on cultural nuances to bridge comprehension gaps.

2) Pedagogical Approaches in Teaching TFL: In the context of teaching TFL in Bangkok, it was observed that a student-centered approach is crucial. However, it was noted that some educators misconstrued student-centered instruction, focusing solely on addressing individual differences and learning styles. The recommended approach is the formulation of a structured learning process aligning with the Ministry of Education's directive (1991), positioning the teacher as a facilitator. This approach, as proposed by Kunthiyaporn (1989), advocates an integrated linguistic approach, encompassing listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking skills. Moreover, familiarity with the International Phonetic Alphabet is essential, as highlighted by Ponmanee (2002), to enhance foreign students' understanding of Thai pronunciation.

3) Effective Implementation of Teaching English as a Foreign Language: The success of teaching English as a foreign language is contingent upon meticulous planning and preparation. Teachers must adhere to a well-organized, sequential teaching strategy to instill confidence in students. The study revealed a dearth of lesson plans, potentially stemming from a lack of awareness of their significance or time constraints faced by educators. It is imperative that teachers evaluate students' baseline knowledge, employ appropriate instructional strategies, and leverage modern technology to enhance learning outcomes. Additionally, teachers should consider adopting innovative instructional methods such as problem-based learning, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and authentic assessment, as these were found to be underutilized in the current study.

4) Challenges and Solutions According to Educators: Teachers in the Bangkok area, despite possessing M.A. qualifications in teaching TFL, encountered instructional challenges similar to their less-educated counterparts. Student disengagement, negative attitudes towards language learning, and pronunciation difficulties persisted. Addressing these challenges requires personalized solutions, as recommended by various studies (Ponmanee, 2002; Saengmanee, 2003; Feng, 2001; Diewsomkit, 2009; Wiboolyasarin, 2010). Notably, the study found a tendency for educators to persist with traditional instructional models, impeding successful adaptation to the evolving needs of learners. The findings underscore the imperative for educators to embrace innovative teaching models and consider ongoing curricular enhancements.

CONCLUSION

The comprehensive analysis of educators' perspectives on teaching TFL in educational institutions in the Bangkok area offers valuable insights into the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their nuanced experiences. The majority of respondents, predominantly females (80%), exhibited a high level of academic attainment, with 70% holding a master's degree. The field of study reflected a focus on Thai language instruction, and a substantial proportion of respondents (70%) had received training in teaching TFL.

The subsequent exploration of the states and challenges in teaching TFL uncovered key themes. Educators emphasized the importance of a deep understanding of the intricacies associated with teaching TFL. Tailoring instruction to meet the specific needs and motivations of foreign learners was highlighted, along with the incorporation of Thai culture and lifestyle into lessons.

The consensus among respondents on the importance of learner-centered approaches and the creation of supportive classroom environments echoed a commitment to student engagement. The significance of thorough preparation for teaching activities, including the use of diverse teaching materials and tailored lesson plans, emerged as crucial elements in effective instruction.

Challenges identified by educators, such as limited vocabulary understanding and pronunciation difficulties, were met with practical solutions, including repeated explanations, simplified vocabulary, and the incorporation of visual aids. Despite the instructional challenges, the majority of educators demonstrated a commitment to innovation, with an acknowledgment of the need to embrace modern teaching methods and technology.

This examination underscores the multifaceted nature of teaching TFL and the dedication of educators in the Bangkok area to overcoming challenges. The recommendations put forth, including a focus on cultural nuances, structured learning processes, meticulous planning, and the integration of modern teaching methods, provide a roadmap for enhancing language instruction. Implementation of these recommendations has the potential to create more effective and engaging learning environments, fostering positive outcomes for both educators and students.

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