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The English Acquisition of Thai Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to identify the English acquisition stages of the junior high school students at Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University and to describe the English acquisition performance of the junior high school students at Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University in term of the highest and lowest stages of the English acquisition. To conduct this research, the researcher used a case study research on Thai students who have learnt English as a foreign language. The participants of this research were 10 students of the Junior High School Satit Demonstartion School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University. For gaining the data. The researcher used structured interviews and observation. The recorded interviews from the ten participants were then transcribed, coded, classified and presented into table. The data were analyzed with the respect of the English morphological acquisition of the Processability Theory (PT). The results of the research showed that only one student enabled to pass the stage 3 of the PT English morphological acquisition. The Influence of First Language has becomes the prominent reason.

Keywords: english acquisition, second language acquisition, processability theory, english learning strategy

Introduction

Nowadays, English is a basic subject in Thailand and also has been required as one of the foreign languages to be mastered by students under the basic education core curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008). English has become a significant part of the Thai educational system. Students are expected to be more proficient in English. The national government being proficient in English means being a more competitive member of society. However, the influence of English is apparently still low in Thailand (Baker, W, 2008) Thai students facing many problems related to linguistic difference between Thai language and English language.

Punthumasan (2007) identified the main causes of the low English performance among the Thai students. Those were as follows: 1) Most of students did not prefer to learn English because they found that the English was boring. English was not familiar, and in a strange language. The students tried very hard to understand or express ideas effectively. 2) Teaching Methods were not attractive or engaging to encourage students to have fun learning English. Most of teachers used grammar and rote learning methods for teaching English which focused on reading and writing skills, not listening and speaking skills. 3) The environment in school did not facilitate students in practicing their English every day. 4) There were not enough attractive textbooks, novels and cartoons or materials in English, which can engage the students' interest in self-initiated learning. 5) There was not enough technology support for language learning, such as ICT (Information Communication Technology) as well as language laboratories, particularly for schools in rural or remote areas throughout the country.

One of the factors causing the student's poor English performance is the students' communication skill. They enabled to pass exam without any difficulty, but they still find some difficulties to communicate in English. The Thai government hired some native English teachers to teach in some public school. The main purpose is that Thai graduates enabled to implement their skill in their career. Unfortunately, the program is still ineffective. Many Thai graduates still have low English proficiency. One of the reasons is because English in Thai is placed as a foreign language.

According to (Saville & Troike, 2005) foreign language is language that is not widely used in the learner's immediate social context that might be learned for travel or other cross-cultural communication situations, or studied as a curricular requirement or elective in school, but with no immediate necessary practical application.

This fits to what happen in Thailand that English is used in limited cases or only specific purposes which is not in education, institution or formal cases.

What happens in Thailand is quite similar to Indonesia? In Indonesia, English is also as a foreign language. English is only used in international academic purposes and international communication, but not in second daily conversation. The comparison between Indonesia and Thailand becomes the research interest of the lecturers of PBI, Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa (UST) which is then proposed as a collaborative research proposal scheme to LP3M UST. For supporting the collaborative research, the present research takes a part in collecting data on English acquisition among Thai students at Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University. Language acquisition is a process where someone acquires a language in an unconscious situation. (Krashen, 1982) who distinguishes both acquisition and learning, he states that —acquisition is a sub-conscious process where the learners acquire language which understandable and meaningful to them. By concentrating on meaning, they subconsciously acquire form.

To find out the English acquisition among this study, the researcher uses Processability Theory (PT) by Pienemann (1998). This theory predicts that language structures can be processed by the learner at a given level development. PT has been applied in many languages. PT provides 6 stages of processing procedures for L2 acquisition: word/lemma access, category procedure, phrasal procedure, VP procedure, Sentence (S) procedure and Sub-clause procedure (Pienemann, 1998). The reason behind choosing this topic is because the researcher was interested in knowing the English acquisition among Thai students and why do they fail or success in some categories. Unfortunately, not many studies take Asian speakers as the participants to see the process of English acquisition as their second language. In this study, the data was taken in Thailand from Nine graders of The Junior High School Students of Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University. The speaking skill of the participants has been measured through individual interviews. The findings of this study might be helpful for those who want to know more on English acquisition among Thai students.

Based on the phenomenon above the researcher would like to carry a research entitled “The English Acquisition Among the Junior High School Students of Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University Thailand.” The present research is also a part of a collaborative research scheme proposed to the LP3M Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa entitled *Penggunaan Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia, Thailand dan Philipina: Sebuah studi Komprasi* sent by Nanang Bagus Subekti and Ima Widayastuti.

In some terms foreign language is called target language. The Collins Dictionary defines Foreign Language as a language that is used in a country other than one’s native country (2013). It means the language is not spoken in learner’s environment. Some example of this would be learning German in the United States and English in China. Meanwhile, there are many ways to practice those skills, but researcher found in this research learners have no opportunities to practice/use in their daily communication. In learning foreign language, students faced many difficulties that caused students’ speaking performance. The foreign language student should be able to use the acquired foreign language “both within and beyond the school setting” (Standards, 2006) The Standards of Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century developed by ACTFL (2006) argue that “the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language” (p. 1).

The Thailand government has chosen English as the first foreign language that students must learn in Thai school. Some function of the teaching English as foreign language such as tools of International communication, aim personal purposes (academic, carrier, etc.), and instrument in utilizing modern science and technology for development

A foreign language is a language studied in an environment where it is not the primary language for daily interaction and where input in that language is restricted (Oxford, 2003). If the language has no certain function in daily communication in the society, for instance English and Mandarin in Indonesia, the language is considered as the foreign language. Similarly, English in Thailand is also as a foreign language.

English as a foreign language is recognized from its existence in the school curriculum in which students must learnt it formally at school (Harmer, 2001). Though it is learnt at schools, English is not used in daily communication and commerce (Douglas, 2001). This means that most students only gain English inputs from schools.

The aim of learning language is that the students are able to use the language, to response any situation, to understand more, and to be able to read and write. The main characteristics of foreign language learning are in amount and type of exposure to the language. The students have very little experience of the language outside the classroom, and encounters with the language is through several hours of learning in a school. Learning to speak in a foreign language (English) is perceived difficult because it not its mother language.

In foreign language teaching, there is an onus on the teacher to provide exposure to the language and to provide opportunities for learning through classroom activities. The goal of teaching a foreign language should not only for learners as their tools to develop their marks academically in learning foreign language other than their mother language, but also to helps to communicate with foreigner for their future.

Processability Theory

Processability Theory (PT) was born out by Pienemann (1984 and 1985) with his colleagues found that instruction and learners' first language backgrounds will have little effect on learners' L2 acquisition if the learners are not yet ready to integrate the new linguistic knowledge into the existing mental system. Processability Theory is a theory that represents a way to relate underlying cognitive processes of the second language (L2) learner's interlanguage system. Processability Theory (PT), (Pienemann, 1998) claims that the learner of a second language (L2) can only produce forms which they are able to process in sequence. It means that the learner has some rules in process learning language. In this research, the students were observed to acquire certain syntactic and morphological features of the L2 predictable stages. These features were referred to as "developmental". It was suggested that each stage represented a further degree of complexity in processing strings of words and grammatical markers. In summary, Processability Theory provides a framework for a psycholinguistic theory of language acquisition that explains developmental sequences in terms of language processing.

Processability Theory has six stages of processing procedures for (L2) acquisition: Word/lemma access, category procedure, phrasal procedure, VP procedure, sentence (S) procedure and sub-clause procedure (Pienemann, 1998). The first step is the *Lexicon / Lemma Access*. In this first step, language learners will produce just words because they only know the basic structure or knowledge of the target language. This is the basic target of the language learners. The second step is the *Category Procedure*. In this step, learners start to arrange word by words by their limited knowledge of language target. The third step is the *Phrasal Procedure*. In this step, learners start to make a phrase from their language target. They understand the shape of structure phrase or how put the head and modifier for phrase that their produce. They also use conjunction though do not understand the structure pragmatically. The fourth step is the *VP-procedure*. This one also known as Interprasal procedure. The fifth step is the *Sentence Procedure*. Learners can produce a good structure of sentence and use the relation between subject-verb. The last step is the *sub-clause procedure* which learners can make correctly English structure.

Method

This research is a Case Study design. A Case study is a research methodology that has commonly used of persons, groups, events, periods, institutions, or other through descriptive and exploratory analysis within real-life context. In this research, researcher tries to analyze some 10 students and predict by get know the student English acquisition. The researcher conducted the research at Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University. The school is located at 321, Narai Maharat Road, Tha Le Chup Sorn, Mueang District, Lopburi Province, Thailand, 15000. The researcher chose this school because the researcher has done the International Internship Program in this school. The researcher has taken this research between 5 August and 24 August 2019. The object of this research were the 10 students of grade 9th at Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University Thailand. The participants of this research were taken from 3 different English proficiencies levels, namely: low, medium, and high competence. In choosing those participants, the research was helped by the teacher.

According to (Miles & Huberman, 1994) there are three steps in analyzing the qualitative data, namely Data Reduction, Data Display, and Conclusion. These steps help the researcher in analyzing the data. The data gathered from the interviews were transcribed using Audacity that can stop or make sound slower. The transcription data were then transferred into an obligatory table of Past *-ed*, plural *-s* standing alone, and 3rd singular person. The obligatory context of the linguistic features above, then, was analyzed using an Emergence Criteria to see the students' acquisition by Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998). To increase the reliability of the research, unclear utterances were checked by Thai students to make sure the utterances transcribed were the same as what the participant said.

In the coding process, researcher give color-blocking to analyze the data on every stage. In the classifying part, researcher classify student's production based on the correct utterances on the obligatory contexts. There are 3 stages namely Stage 2 which analyzed the Regular Past *-ed* form, Stage 3 that analyzed plural *-s* standing alone, and Stage 4 that analyzed 3rd person singular. Each stage was transferred in percentage form of correct utterances and displayed in a table.

Results and Discussion

Results

The research findings are to display the research data for answering the two questions in the present research. Those research questions are related to the English acquisition stage of the Junior High School students at Satit Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University, and the English performance of those students.

Table1. The English Acquisition Result

Students	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
S1	2/3 66.7%	1/10 10%	1/15 6.7%
S2	1/3 33.3%	7/10 70%	1/26 3.8%
S3	0/9 0%	4/7 57.1%	0/8 0%
S4	½ 50%	2/4 50%	0/20 0%
S5	0/8 0%	1/12 8.3%	2/22 9%
S6	0/14 0%	¼ 25%	2/32 6.3%
S7	0/7 0%	4/13 30.8%	1/38 2.6%
S8	0/2 0%	1/9 11.1%	4/36 11.1%
S9	2/5 40%	22/25 88%	6/52 11.5%
S10	0/5 0%	11/17 64.7%	0/21 0%

From the table above, it can be seen that only one student who passes the minimum correct production requirement of obligatory contexts. The S9 passes the Stage 3 of the PT English acquisition with the correct utterances of 88%. S9 produced 22 correct utterances out of 25. However, the other nine students disabled to produce the minimum obligatory contexts utterances on Stage 2 and Stage 4 of the PT English acquisition.

The Highest Stage Performance

From the Table 2, the researcher found that only S9 who reaches the Stage 3 on the Processability Theory of the English acquisition. The S9 was able to produce 22 correct utterances among 25 on the Stage 3. The Stage 3 of PT morphological acquisition is depicted to the phrasal stage. The structure phrasal plural –s. Here is the example of the extracted data from the S9's utterance.

R: and how about after class, what he usually do?
 S9: After the class actually don't know he do but I saw like **two days** ago I saw he he posted on Facebook he went to the gym I really don't know what he do

Figure 1. The clustered data example 1

From the data above, it can be seen clearly that the *two days* is a noun phrase which is compiled from two words. The word *two* is a number functioning as a modifier of the word *days* as the head noun of the noun phrase. Another example is of the S9's utterance which supports to the Stage 3 data elicitation is presented below.

R: Okay, so, I have two pictures here, can you tell umm I want you to describe the first picture. Right. Okay. Yup. Please
 S9: A girl with a blue shirt with a star in the middle is like pass the ball to the boy with red hair and the polka dot red polka dot shirt and like purple **purple pants** and a girl with a pink dress is like walk with her dog and a boy with a yellow hair a yellow shirt and **blue jeans** is like playing with the duck in the left left side and a man with I think it's It thinks it's his uniform is reading a newspaper and a girl who wear yellow shirt and **pink shorts** is eating ice cream and **two girls** one wear the the dark red colour and one wear the pink colour is riding ohh are riding bicycles together and the **two cats two black cats** its are walking and like two Madam one wear pink dress and one wear dark blue dress are talking together

Figure2. The clustered data example 2

There are several phrasal plurals –s counted from the extracted data above such as *purple pants, blue jeans, pink shorts, two girls, two cats, and two black cats*. The three first noun phrases uttered by the participant S9 are composed by color and noun. Meanwhile the two rest noun phrases are consisted of number-head noun, and number-color-head noun respectively.

The Lowest Stage

The participants coded S3, S5, S6, S7 and S10 do not reach any correct utterances (0%) of any stages of the PT English morphological acquisition. This means that, those five participants are included to the lowest stage. Here are some examples of those five students' utterances.

R:	Okay so, what TV program does your sister often watch?
S8:	Sister watch cartoon

Figure 3. The clustered data example 3

From the data above, it can be seen that S8 said **watch** which the wrong sentences. It should add -es as **watches** for the 3rd singular person.

Discussion

The research findings show that among the ten students, there is only one student reaching Stage 3 and all do not pass any stages. The reason why most of students do not pass any stage because of some factors. The language transfer from the participants' first language affects greatly on their English acquisition.

The language structure of English and Thai are different. Thai does not apply tenses structures as in English. This is just like in Bahasa Indonesia in which tenses does not exist. Though Indonesians had natural exposures on native speaker environment for more than one year, they still disabled to acquire the English acquisition and made constant mistakes in tenses (Zhang & Widyastuti, 2020). Similarly, Thai also brings effects on the English acquisition among learners from Thailand.

Thai does not differentiate the singular and plural forms as on Stage 2 of PT

In Thai, there is no singular or plural. This means that in Thai, the forms of singular as well as plural are the same. To notice the nouns in singular or plural, Thai only requires word markers. For example, **cats** is used for singular, and two birds is for showing the plural. Here is the example taken from the interview between the researcher and the S8.

R:	That's it. Okay so now, I want you to compare Picture number 1 between Picture number 1 and Picture number 2? Compare please?
S8:	She in picture 2 she walk she walk she walking with her dog and Picture 1 she walking with two her dog and and she aww in Picture 2 she play volley ball only one and Picture 1 she play volley ball with her friend ehh his friend his friend yes the last in Picture 2 she hold bag and Picture 1 she aww sorry sorry in picture 2 she haven't a bag and picture 1 she hold a bag yes in Picture 2 she drink a water and in Picture 1 she eat ice cream in Picture 2 have one cats and Picture 1 have two cats in Picture 2 have one spider and Picture 1 have one spider same in Picture 2 have two bird on the tree on the tree yes and Picture 1 ehh sorry sorry in Picture 2 haven't bird on the tree and Picture 1 have two have two bird on the tree in Picture 2 in Picture 2 have store in Picture 2 have nine store and in Picture 1 have nine store same in Picture 1 have a have a have a pink flower and in Picture 2 have a yellow flower

Figure 4. The clustered data example 4

In Thai there is no structured that show singular and plural forms. In this case, S8 still produce the wrong utterances influenced by the first language. Thai is an uninflected language. So, nouns and verbs do not change

their forms for number, gender, case or person but separate words are used. The use of inflections makes Thai students confuse. There are no articles in Thai noun phrases. So, adjectives occur after a modified noun or the head noun. Unlike English structure, there is the pattern of subject + adjective in Thai structure.

<p>R: Aww. Many people. Can you tell me about your close friend maybe about their like, what their favorite food or what they look like or character?</p> <p>S8: I like I like Bew and Mink because she look very very like beautiful like a she kind</p>
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Figure 5. The clustered data example 5

From the data above, the structure of the subject + adjective “she kind” shows that Thai students often puts the adjectives after subject without the use of linking verbs due to the interfere of Thai language.

Thai does not apply tenses as on Stage 2 of PT

The verbs in Thai do not change as in English. Actually, Thai language doesn't have a past tense and Thais add a time word to communicate the tense. In showing the time, Thai only uses time markers, such as wan-nee (yesterday). Due to the difference above, it is understandable if the participants on the current study made many mistakes in producing past *regular verb -ed* form.

<p>R: (laughing) Okay. So, could you tell me about your last holiday?</p> <p>S6: I'm study and listen to music and play with cat</p>

Figure 6. The clustered data example 6

From the data above, it can be seen that students did not used the past -ed form while telling their past activities. Similarly to Bahasa Indonesia, most learners from Indonesia are quite difficult to employ the past-ed structure to their speaking (Widyastuti, 2015).

Thai does not have S-V agreement as on Stage 3 of PT

The form of verb on Thai does not influenced by the form of subject.

<p>R: Okay. So, on the weekends, what does your mother usually do?</p> <p>S10: My mother go to the mall and shopping every she want umm she want to photo a good place and she want to eat good food</p>
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From the data above, S10 did not add -es/s to make a correct sentence. In English, the form of verb is dependents on many factors such as the person, number, tense and even gender of the subject. However, Thai language use the same verb even the subject is we/you/I/ he or she.

The subject and object in Thai are often left out. As a result, students often apply this to English so that the sentences produced are rendered objectless or subject less.

<p>R: Can you tell me about maybe their personality/ character, can you tell me?</p> <p>S1: aaa.... He is a also handsome people of all.</p> <p>R: Who is the name?</p> <p>S1: every...Everyone.</p>
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From the data above, it can be seen that the students' answer was not clear enough or misunderstanding.

In learning English as Foreign Language, Thai students faced some problems in pronunciation. Based on researcher observation, some letters in English like [θ], [ð], [r], [s], [k], and [t] do not exist in Thai. Even though adult learners from Indonesia mostly do not face the same problem, children found it difficult to pronounce those some sounds due to the age (Widyastuti & Kumyai, 2019).

R: Ajarn Neth. So, can you describe me about Ajarn Neth?
S2: She is a so kind and for her teaching is very good. I can understand everything she **teach**.

Most of Thai students faced some difficulties to pronounce some English consonant that already mention above because that are not existing in Thai. The students also find it hard to pronounce consonant clusters such as /dr/, /fl/, /fr/, /sl/, /sp/, /st/ and /sw/ /θr/

R: Okay. So, could you tell me what did you play with your friends when you're kid?
S7: I always play with my friend is Kradhot Yang is two people **throw** the rubber and one people jump jump and xxx one by one yes yes that's fun I love it

The students produce the unclear sound of **throw**.

Thai learners often drop final sound -d and -ed.

R: okay, So, what did you play with your friends when you were a kid?
S4: I **played** at playground like slider and the swing.

This might cause by the difference between first language and target one by which -d and -ed is not occurred in Thai sound system. This could lead to the students' oral communication problem.

Conclusion

This research is about the English Acquisition in Thai Junior High School Students which English has taught as a Foreign Language. Based on the data collection, most of students in Satit The Demonstration School of Thepsatri Rajabhat University do not pass any stages of acquisition level by Processability Theory. Only one student passed Stage 3. The prominent factor caused the students' performance the influence of the First Language. Surprisingly, what the learners face in learning English as their foreign language is similar to what Indonesians experience.

Recommendations

Conducting the further research on the English acquisition is still interesting. The information about the level of the learners English acquisition will be valuable in recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of the learners. Furthermore, the information is also useful for designing the appropriate learning media as well as learning strategies to the learners.

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