

Thainess-based English lessons: Reshaping grassroots English education

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ABSTRACT

In Thailand, the question of how to improve the abilities of English language learners without affecting their Thai identity has arisen. This article reports a study that demonstrates that a series of specifically northern Thainess-based instructions for Grade 4 pupils in northern Thailand could not only teach the pupils about their northern Thainess, but also improve their English vocabulary. A set of northern Thainess-based English lessons as well as the corresponding Thainess and English vocabulary pretests and posttests were designed for use in four elementary schools in the north of Thailand. The pretest and posttest scores on both aspects showed that both the pupils' appreciation of Thainess and their knowledge of English vocabulary considerably improved. The result suggests the positive effects of this system of learning. From a pedagogical viewpoint, it seems that the use of such materials may well be used to improve and reshape English language education throughout the country.

Keywords: Elementary education; English lessons; northern Thai identity; Thainess; vocabulary

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INTRODUCTION

As English has become a global language together with various corresponding factors generated by globalization and regionalization, the concepts of national culture and identity have come under fire according to some scholars, educators, administrator and even politicians, who are concerned about the influx of foreign influences (Borden, 2014; Hughes, 2013; Makoe, 2014). Correspondingly, a number of measures have, therefore, been brought into action so as to preserve and encourage the national identity of the learners. This scenario is particularly exacerbated in Asian countries which have long-standing historical and cultural traditions. Specifically, an increasing influx of the English language and other cultural features pertaining to the English language into Thailand has rendered national Thai characteristics vulnerable (Kanoksilapatham, 2016; Simpson & Thammasathien,

2007). To avoid imminent subjugation, it is urged that Thai identity be maintained. However, little research has investigated the impact of integrating national identity on learners of English, not to mention a study that focuses on integrating Thainess into Thai learners' English instruction. Therefore, this study aims to examine the impacts of the local Thainess-based English lessons on young Thai learners.

It should be noted that this article does not assume that the two issues are in conflict or compete with each other. In fact, this study aims to demonstrate that these two forces can significantly substantiate each other, yielding positive impacts on English language learning. It specifically aims to highlight the benefits of Thainess-based lessons in fostering northern Thai identity in young Thai learners of English as well as expanding their English vocabulary knowledge. A series of English lessons was constructed along with similar Thainess and

English vocabulary pretests and posttests. Subsequently, after the Thainess and vocabulary pretests, this set of English lessons was implemented in four classes of Grade 4 pupils in four northern provinces. By the end of the implementation, the posttests of Thainess and vocabulary were administered. In both tests, the posttest scores were significantly higher than the corresponding pretest scores, indicating the positive impact of the northern Thainess-based materials. This study provides insights into how the English language can be utilized to pass on information about the learners' local Thai culture. Pedagogical practices and implications are offered to ameliorate and strengthen English language teaching in Thailand.

Globalization and regionalization

In many countries across the globe, including Thailand, the learning of the English language has gained hugely in popularity since the start of the new millennium, while, at the same time, English has taken on the mantle as the international language of the world (Widodo, Wood, & Gupta, 2017). This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in Asia, where many developing Asian countries now see knowledge of English as a passport to business and industrial successes. Within the ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region, this concept has been pushed even further by the formation of the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) in 2015. This community decided to use English as a regional lingua franca, instantly making an understanding of the language even more important. In this regard, both trends of globalization and regionalization have culminated in the highlighted role of the English language in the ASEAN region. Thus, for Thailand to thrive regionally and internationally, Thai citizens' English must be developed and improved to effectively satisfy the national, regional, and global demands of English in all areas/sectors.

The English language and Thai culture

The effects of the learning of English together with its undoubted power across the globe and its influences on other national cultures and identities have been acknowledged and reported (Barghouthi, 2008; Henao, 2017; Turnbull, 2017). Furthermore, the English language and other western cultural influences are increasingly available from other sources, painting an even darker picture. Two Asian countries are particularly aware of this problem. Firstly, Japanese history shows a vast melange of cultures, of which the Japanese people are justifiably proud, but they are unhappy about the westernization of their lives and cultures brought to them by globalization. They are concerned that all these external influences are threatening to undermine their fiercely nationalistic identity (McKenzie, 2010; Turnbull, 2017). These negative attitudes are inevitably beginning to affect the popularity of and desire for English language education in Japanese schools and universities. This has resulted in Japanese students failing to score well on English

tests, failing to reach high levels of practical English skills, and even failing in basic English communication skills when compared with other countries in the region.

Elsewhere in Asia, Thailand also has a long history of cultural traditions, and is also fiercely proud of its own identity. English, however, appears in many guises in the day-to-day activities of the Thai people, especially in the major cities and popular tourist destinations, suggesting that the use of English is relatively widespread and, apparently, acceptable. The influx of the English language through songs, media, and the movies has also had its effect, possibly posing a further threat to the identity of the Thai people (Jory, 2003). This has resulted in what seems to be an almost direct assault on Thai culture by the influences and effects of learning English. Kubota (2002) and Liddicoat (2007) observed that this influence coming from the West raises questions of how to maintain normal Thai values and culture in the 21st century. The significance of "identity" was examined in order to acquire a greater knowledge of the cultural dynamics of language education (Barkhuizen, 2017; Block, 2007). It would appear that the maintenance of national and cultural identity has gained in importance in terms of concern over the desire to improve the Thai language learning experience.

English language education in Thailand and hindering factors

In spite of the fact that the English language has become firmly established in Thailand, the teaching of English has run into a number of problems, resulting in what has been termed as an "unsatisfactory" performance according to various reports (Kanoksilapatham, 2014; Prapphal, 2003; Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2002). For instance, the national test O-NET (Ordinary National Education Test), which is compulsory for Thai students in Grades 6, 9, and 12, consists of many subjects including English. In 2013, a total of 414,688 Grade 12 students took the English O-NET. From a total of 100 points, the mean score was 25.35 with the highest score being 98 and the lowest zero. When scrutinizing the results, it can be seen that less than half of the test-takers reached the mean score, and many of the test takers got zero in English. In the academic year of 2016, the students' average O-NET score in English was 25.98, the lowest of all subjects (Fernquest, 2017).

Another source of information that affirms Thai learners' unsatisfactory English performance is from a series of annual studies conducted on non-native speakers of English by EF or Education First, the world's largest international private education company specializing in language training, educational travel, academic-degree programs, and cultural exchanges (<https://www.ef.edu/epi/>). For example, in 2014, Thailand was ranked 48 from 63 countries. In 2015, of all 70 nations, Thailand was ranked 62, next to the lowest scores of Cambodian test takers (ranked 69). In comparison with the other 16 Asian nations, Thai test

takers were ranked 14. Based on the five-year period records from 2011 to 2015, Thailand has been labeled as a “very low proficiency” group. Education First’s 2017 English Proficiency Index Report revealed that Thailand had the third lowest English proficiency rating of the ASEAN nations, only better than Cambodia and Laos, ranked 15 out of 20 Asian countries, and ranked 53 of 80 nations around the world, coming in the classification category of “low proficiency.”

Moreover, based on the internationally standardized English language tests like the TOEFL iBT, the results of Asian citizens taking the test from January 2012 to December 2012 showed that the average scores of Singaporeans were the highest, followed by those from India, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Other Asian test takers who performed better than Thais include those from Indonesia, Vietnam, and China. In fact, Thai test takers on average only performed better than those from Laos, Japan, and Cambodia (Kanoksilapatham, 2016).

Based on these national and international English language assessments, a picture of Thai learners’ English proficiency becomes clear. In fact, the congruent unsatisfactory performance of Thai learners has been observed across the entire paradigm of education in Thailand and for an extended period of time. It is thus almost impossible to deny that Thais’ English proficiency and English education need to be urgently ameliorated. Certain strategies need to be devised to deal with the situation and to enhance Thai learners’ English.

Prescribed English textbooks in Thai elementary education

In a setting in which English is learned as a second or foreign language, English teachers are expected to perform a crucial role as a resource person to provide language input to language learners. In addition to the language teachers, Razi (2003, as cited by Razmjoo, 2007) emphasizes that textbooks play a crucial role in language teaching and learning, and thus are considered the next important factor after teachers. In fact, textbooks for language learning stipulate what students need to learn; textbook features play a crucial part determining, to a certain extent, the success of language learning outcomes. Therefore, textbooks need to be meticulously constructed to achieve specific educational aims and provide support facilitating the process of acquiring knowledge and values (Widodo, 2018).

Textbooks need to be effective and functional, catering to the specific needs of learners in a specific setting. Unfortunately, developing textbooks that correspond to a specific curriculum or address specific goals of learners in a specific context is an extremely daunting task. Currently, commercial textbooks used in public schools in Thailand are usually prescribed by the Ministry of Education. The textbooks available are produced by international publishers for diverse groups of English language learners in different parts of the world. As a consequence, the contents of the textbooks

produced do not delve into a particular context, but instead focus on presenting the cultural features pertaining to the cultures of English speaking countries. In short, commercial textbooks with features concentrating on English hegemony do not take into consideration local cultures or contexts. In fact, local contexts are likely to be ignored or underrepresented (Saraceni, 2009; Tomlinson, 2005; Widodo, Perfecto, Canh, & Buripakdi, 2018a). Given the age of young learners and the possible difficulty in connecting with the lessons presented in commercial textbooks, learners might find it difficult to be motivated to learn English or, simply, to appreciate English.

Focusing on the Western features presented in commercial textbooks and from a comparison and contrast perspective, the culture of the English speaking countries is relatively distinct from that of Thailand (e.g., language, weather, food, way of life, beliefs, practices, or traditions). Therefore, commercial textbooks focusing on the cultural features of the target language might not be appropriate for young learners who are less likely to be ready to be socialized into the realm of the Anglo Saxon world (Lim & Keuk, 2018; Widodo et al., 2018b). A worse case scenario is that cultural mismatches between the target language and the learners’ native language might be so prominent that the learners find it hard to understand, appreciate, or practice the target language. Moreover, substantial exposure to a textbook containing Western features for an extended period of years may incidentally result in a loss of learners’ national identity through English education – a threat that many scholars are concerned about in connection with national identity preservation. In short, these cultural differences hinder learners’ understanding of these textbooks without substantial help (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Kristiawan 2012). In this regard, it might be more feasible, beneficial, and psychologically healthy to have English teaching materials that focus on learners’ national identity features.

It has been suggested that a perfect textbook should focus on what would be relevant to the learners’ needs, and therefore stimulate their interest. In order to do this, they should relate to the learners’ community, culture, and language (Tomlinson, 2011). It is clear that textbook construction is crucial for language learning, determining the extent or degree of education success. Pedagogically, an ideal textbook should integrate learners’ national identity features or local features. Psychologically, this type of textbook would be less daunting for the learners, allowing them to focus on the language and free them from worrying about the content presented in the textbook. It is unlikely that the textbook contents about local Thainess features with which Thai learners are somehow familiar would hinder the learners’ comprehension and appreciation. Consequently, the learners can devote their attention to the language instead. In relevance to this, the materials contents of English language textbooks need to undergo significant changes.

Northern Thai identity and elementary English education

The identity of a nation is an extremely complicated affair and includes a large number of factors, including history, geography, religion, art, literature, customs, entertainment, and architecture; some of which are easier to understand and appreciate than others (Barrett et al., 2004). In some cases, it is easier for scholars to understand and appreciate them, and in others, young learners might find them easier. Elementary education is thus hugely important in supplying the basic foundations of the whole learning paradigm. Furthermore, in order to prepare young learners for life in their own country, it is important to instill a sense of nationality in them at an early age (Kramersch, 2014). Given this basic grounding, these young learners will later be able to distinguish between their culture and foreign cultures when they encounter them and become more aware of their own national identity. Kanoksilapatham's (2016) study on northeastern Thailand produced positive results and demonstrated that the teaching of Thainess, when combined with the learning of the English language, can produce satisfactory results, and may be considered to be effective in achieving this goal.

The whole range of national identities cannot be easily be implemented for teaching materials for young learners. Tourist attractions are one of the most tangible elements or dimensions that characterize Thai identity. Moreover, the focus on tourist attractions in a specific region allows English language learners to relate to their immediate environment, and thus develop a sense of belonging. Since it is imperative that English language teaching in Thailand be developed so that Thailand can compete with other countries in the region and in the world, to address this concern, it is expected that the construction of Thainess-based instructional innovations can represent an effort in that direction.

METHOD

This study aims to examine the potential positive impacts of Thainess-based English lessons on reshaping grassroots English education, particularly developing young Thai learners' northern Thainess and English vocabulary knowledge. Specifically, this study focuses on determining whether the set of northern Thainess-based lessons can help improve the learners' Thainess and English vocabulary associated with northern Thailand.

Northern school contexts and participants

This study was set specifically in northern Thailand. The participants of this study were elementary students of four public schools in four provinces in northern Thailand. The process of selection of the schools in question depended on three factors. Firstly, they needed to possess the necessary technical equipment and know-how, including a computer and projector. Secondly, they needed to be willing to co-operate and participate

in this study spanning ten weeks. Thirdly, they needed to be flexible with study hours and classroom time.

Each school principal was given the task of selecting one class with students of varied English abilities from each school. It was decided to recruit Grade 4 pupils only because they should have enough experience in learning English to be able to take up and understand the course materials in question, and also because Grade 4 pupils in Thailand have no other national exams to interrupt their learning process, or, indeed, the tasks required of them for this study. A total of 139 pupils (9 - 10 years old; 69 boys and 70 girls) from four schools in the north of Thailand were chosen to take part in this study.

Materials design

The design and construction of the instructional materials to be used in this study were of great importance, providing a basis for which the testing and assessment tools had to be subsequently developed.

A series of northern Thainess-based English lessons was to be designed and constructed to facilitate the young learners' understanding and exploration of their own national identity, while also learning some English vocabulary pertinent to the northern Thainess-based lessons. To accomplish this goal, needs analysis was conducted through the medium of a questionnaire so as to ensure that the lesson topics were related to the students' northern Thai identity. As the concept of "northern Thainess" could be defined in many different ways, more abstract areas were intentionally avoided, and more concrete and obvious factors which would be better understood by the young learners were selected. It was therefore decided in this study to concentrate on tourist attractions in the north of the country which would be relevant to the participants, and these therefore became the theme of the northern Thainess-based lessons.

Initially, a survey questionnaire was devised as an instrument for needs analysis, consisting of 32 tourist attractions generated by an Internet search – all of which are located in different provinces in northern Thailand. A total of 1,870 questionnaires were distributed to residents in 17 provinces in the north of the country (110 for each province). Each recipient of a questionnaire was asked to choose eight out of a list of 32 sites in the north of Thailand that they felt Grade 4 pupils should know about. A total of 1,698 replies were received, and the information therein was used to produce a list of the top eight sites which, in turn, became the topics of the eight northern Thainess-based lessons.

Based on the eight tourist attractions, eight English lessons were constructed, following the same pattern and format, consisting of two parts: vocabulary and reading. According to Folse (2011) and Martinez (2014), vocabulary plays a significant role in language learning. Consequently, the first part of the lessons focuses on ten selected English vocabulary items pertaining to the topic of each lesson (Coxhead, 2006).

According to recommendations made by Graves et al. (2014) and Schmitt (1997), the target words chosen were meaningful, accessible, and essential for each lesson. To exemplify, Figure 1 presents a list of ten words targeted in *Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple*.

In the pursuit of greater knowledge of the vocabulary of a foreign language, it is necessary for the new lexis to be learned and practiced in natural ways (McCarten, 2007; Nation, 1990, 2001). Contextualization of the new lexis, therefore, enhances the natural background which, in turn, encourages the

understanding of the lexis in question. With this in mind, each lesson began with the learning of ten new words which were then contextualized in a reading text later in the lesson. The reading section of each lesson was designed to contain between six and eight sentences in English which related to the topic of the lesson, while also providing suitable contexts for the new words about each tourist attraction. The sentences appearing in the first lesson describing *Rong Khun Temple* are shown in Figure 2, with the target lexis underlined.

Lesson 1 Rong Khun Temple	
VOCABULARY	
temple	วัด
design	ออกแบบ
temple hall	พระอุโบสถ
purity	ความบริสุทธิ์
the Buddha	พระพุทธเจ้า
bridge	สะพาน
pond	สระน้ำ
in front of	ข้างหน้า
painting	ภาพวาด
inside	ภายใน

Figure 1. Target vocabulary for Lesson 1

Lesson 1: Rong Khun temple

1. Rong Khun Temple is in Chiang Rai (Province).
2. Chalermchai Kositpipat (เฉลิมชัย โฆษิตพิพัฒน์) designed the temple.
3. Rong Khun Temple has a temple hall.
4. The temple hall is white.
5. White means the purity of the Buddha.
6. A bridge and a small pond are in front of the temple hall.
7. Many paintings are on the green walls inside the temple hall.

Figure 2. Lesson 1 – Wat Rong Khun

When dealing with anything as concrete as a tourist attraction, it is inevitable that proper nouns and names relating to these places will come up. In order to facilitate the students' understanding of these names, various gambits were used. All names, when used, were transliterated into Thai and placed in brackets beside their English equivalents (Camo & Ballester, 2015). The same was true of each of the ten new words in each lesson. That is, they too were given L1 equivalents. Furthermore, in order to improve the visual impact of

the ten new words, they were also highlighted (Schmitt, 1997). These new words were also repeated in subsequent lessons, helping the learners to integrate all the words from previous lessons, while also reinforcing their Thai identity at the same time (Nation, 2015; Webb, Newton, & Chang, 2013).

The hand-outs for each of the eight lessons constructed were distributed to the pupils in the classroom. PowerPoint presentations, together with 8-10 minute videos and other multi-media materials

pertaining to the tourist attractions in question, were employed in order to make the lessons more exciting and thus stimulate the students' interest.

Based upon the set of the eight lessons, tests of northern Thainess and vocabulary associated with northern Thainess were generated. The Thainess test was to assess the students' northern Thainess knowledge before and after the exposure to the eight lessons and instruction. Additionally, the test was to examine the impact of the northern Thainess-based

materials and instruction on the students' northern Thainess knowledge. It was written in Thai and contained 40 questions relating to the entire set of the lessons. Taking the Thainess test involved minimal writing. As a matter of fact, the students were required to simply fill in blanks within sentences, with five sentences relating to each lesson. The five northern Thainess questions relating to *Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple* appear in Figure 3.

Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple

1. *Rong Khun Temple* is in the province of _____.
2. _____ was the person who designed *Rong Khun Temple*.
3. The white color of the temple hall means the purity of _____.
4. A bridge and a small _____ are in front of the temple hall.
5. Tourists can see many _____ on the walls inside the temple hall.

Figure 3. Northern Thainess test

The test of vocabulary was designed to examine not only the pupils' knowledge of the new lexis before and after the exposure to the northern Thainess-based instruction but also the effects of the vocabulary-based materials and instruction on the learners' vocabulary knowledge. The vocabulary test has 40 items, with five words selected from each lesson. A word was read out

loud twice, and the pupils were to choose one of the pictures projected on a screen that matched the word heard by marking their answers on the answer sheet. Figure 4 depicts an exemplified vocabulary test item, with the target word of "temple" and four pictures for the students to choose from.


Vocabulary Test

คะแนน


ชื่อ-สกุล _____ เลขที่ _____ โรงเรียน _____

คำสั่ง ในแต่ละข้อต่อไปนี้ ให้นักเรียนวงกลม a, b, c, หรือ d เพื่อเลือกรูปภาพให้ตรงกับคำศัพท์ที่นักเรียนได้ยิน


1.




a)



b)



c)



d)

Figure 4. Vocabulary test

Materials implementation

It is worth bearing in mind that the flexibility and understanding of the school administrators at each school was vital to the success of the project, as its implementation was a ten-week intervention in the

normal running of the school. In the classroom, the first week was obviously the initial meeting between the pupils and the author as a researcher. During this first class, after ice-breaking activities, the reasons and background of the study were explained to the students,

after which they were asked to complete the Thainess and English vocabulary pretests.

The Thainess pretest was administered first, followed by the vocabulary pretest, of approximately 20 minutes each. The instruction commenced after the completion of the two pretests in the first class of Week 1. Each pupil received a hand-out of the introductory lesson, which follows the same format as the other eight lessons, displaying ten key words followed by a set of sentences relating to the northern region. This introductory lesson was to enable the pupils to get a rough idea of what the intervention was all about, as well as give them some general information about northern Thailand.

Following the initial week's activities, weekly two-hour classes taught the developed materials for eight more weeks (16 hours in total from Weeks 2 to Week 9). As previously mentioned, a variety of gambits were introduced to each class to improve both the pupils' vocabulary and their knowledge of northern Thainess. As well as the afore-mentioned video and multimedia presentations, these gambits included games, practice, drills, repetitions, and other tasks to improve the pronunciation and understanding of the young learners.

During the implementation of the northern Thainess-based lessons for ten weeks, the presence of a school teacher teaching English was required to observe classroom activities. In order to reinforce the instruction of each lesson, a dictation task of the words learned was conducted in the subsequent week to reinforce what was learned in class. However, the scores were not analyzed.

Northern Thainess and vocabulary knowledge assessment

The final week of the intervention in Week 10 was to evaluate the outcomes of the implementation of the northern Thainess-based English lessons by using the posttests (which was similar to the pretest) to assess vocabulary and Thainess knowledge. The purpose of the Thainess and vocabulary posttest was to find out whether the young Thai learners of English had

developed their northern Thainess and vocabulary knowledge, after eight weeks of instruction.

Data analysis

The learners' vocabulary and Thainess pretests and posttests were marked, with a correct answer scoring 1 point, and an incorrect answer scoring 0. In the northern Thainess tests, spelling was not a consideration, so long as the answers were comprehensible. The overall scores for all tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics. In order to discover whether the northern Thainess-based instruction had achieved its aims, descriptive statistics of the pupils' gain scores was performed. Similarly, a paired-samples *t*-test was used to analyze the pretest and posttest scores to highlight any significant differences between the means of the pretest and posttest scores.

FINDINGS

Based on the pretest Thainess scores shown in Table 1, out of a total of 40 points, the mean score of 139 pupils from the four schools is 6.36. The number clearly indicates that the pupils in the northern region, particularly before the instruction, had relatively limited northern Thainess knowledge. Some pupils had no knowledge of tourist attractions in northern Thailand and scored zero on this test. The highest Thainess score of 15 displayed that these young learners of English had very little knowledge about their locality.

After the pupils' exposure to the instruction for a period of eight weeks, the analysis of the Thainess posttest scores showed an average of 25.82 (Table 1), with some pupils achieving full marks of 40. In order to find out just how much the pupils had improved their northern Thainess knowledge over the 8-week instruction, the gain scores were analyzed, producing an average gain of 19.45. As can also be seen in Table 1, the paired samples *t*-test demonstrates that the pretest and posttest northern Thainess scores were significantly different, suggesting a substantial improvement in the learners' knowledge of northern Thainess over the duration of the instruction.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and paired-samples *t*-test of Thainess scores (*n* = 139; total = 40)

	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Pretest score	0	15	6.36	3.59
Posttest score	5	40	25.82	7.99
Gain score	3	34	19.45	7.59

$t(138) = -27.965, p < .001$

As for the vocabulary tests in Table 2, the average pretest score across the four schools is 13.94, whereas that of the posttest score is 29.42, demonstrating a substantial increase of 15.48 points. To further examine whether the increase of 15.48 is significantly different, a

paired-samples *t*-test comparing the pretest and posttest mean scores of the vocabulary suggests that northern Thainess-based materials and instruction had a crucial and significant impact on the learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and paired-samples *t*-test of vocabulary scores (*n* = 139; total = 40)

	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Pretest score	0	29	13.94	5.80
Posttest score	15	40	29.42	5.28
Gain score	1	36	15.48	7.06

$t(138) = -23.921, p < .001$

These two sets of results, both Thainess and English vocabulary, indicate that the northern Thainess-based materials used contributed considerably to the pupils' northern Thainess and vocabulary knowledge development. The significant gain scores in particular suggest that the instructional innovation and its implementation in general were successful in achieving their aims.

DISCUSSION

The evident success of this study demonstrates that the set of northern Thainess-based lessons constructed for 4th graders focusing on northern Thainess particularly using northern Thai tourist attractions as a theme significantly improves the pupils' knowledge of both northern Thailand and English vocabulary relating to the north of the country. The pretest and posttest scores show that the pupils in question have improved their knowledge of northern Thainess while expanding their knowledge of related vocabulary in English. It seems, therefore, that this attempt to improve the pupils' understanding of their own identity, together with improving their English related to this identity, was a positive and beneficial move.

Northern Thai learners' cultural competence and pedagogical implications

After the 10-week exposure to Thainess-based English lessons, the pupils have become more competent in Thainess and English vocabulary. This positive relationship could be attributed to a number of possible explanations. First, the materials contents represent a means of establishing a connection between the pupils and the lessons, allowing them to form, project, and strengthen their identity, as well as a tool to expand their cultural knowledge. In this regard, the lessons provide the learners with an opportunity to shape, highlight, and realize the value of their own background and identity. Second, through these English lessons, the Thai identity of the learners is being forged, connecting them with the lessons and enhancing the learners' motivation for learning English. In a sense, the language learners are set free to embrace their own roots and identity. Third, the nature and contents of the lessons possibly allow these young learners to find the task of learning English much more pleasant and less cognitively overloading. This can be compared to a regular classroom setting using commercialized textbooks based on native speakers' culture when young learners may struggle to understand the contents of the lessons while executing a language task. Moreover, the learners may feel more confident and proud to be experts in their local Thai cultural attractions. Thus, the task of learning English is facilitated, becoming less daunting and less strenuous because the learners can focus on the language use instead. In short, English is harnessed as a vehicular means of expressing something that the learners have knowledge about.

It is acknowledged that intercultural competence awareness plays a vital role in effective communication

(Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018). Given that the world we live in nowadays is a big melting pot, intercultural knowledge should be directly and indirectly embraced and forged. However, prior to learners' intercultural competence development, they need to be primarily aware of their own local culture and form their own identity so that it can provide them with a solid foundation to further develop their intercultural competence (Barkhuizen, 2017; Block, 2007; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018). The findings generated by this study can thus act as a wake-up call, emphasizing that English language education and national identity are actually not two conflicting forces. As demonstrated, these two forces can be compromised and mutually substantiated to both enhance English language learning and maintain national identity features. Additionally, through exposure to Thainess-based English lessons, these young learners are better equipped with the potential to develop their own strategies to maintain their identity as they engage in the English language learning process. Thus, they are more likely to be successful when exposed to a transition to a new culture or identity situation.

Thainess features encapsulated a number of constructs. In this study, Thainess features refer to tourist attractions in northern Thailand, which, in turn, depict a myriad of Thai cultural characteristics including history, arts, and the environment. The lessons developed thus reflect the disciplinary nature of the lessons. Therefore, the lessons are useful not just to enhance English competence but can also be adapted to foster the knowledge of other disciplines that help shape the multifaceted identity of the country.

This study offers valuable and practical insights into how language learning and pedagogical practice can be enhanced particularly in Thailand. The fallacy that the contents related to native speakers of English in English lessons or instructional materials are appropriate for young learners is being challenged. In conclusion, a much healthier approach to teaching young learners requires that teachers exert their energy, expertise, and confidence in creating their own teaching materials, which can be designed and developed based on the local contexts of the students. Pedagogically, lessons generated using local cultural features are considered to be beneficial, diminishing the disparity or gap between urban and rural learners, because rural learners can directly enjoy and benefit from their local culture. Therefore, learners' cultural features should be integrated into the English curriculum and also receive priority in the continuum of language learning.

Limitations and further studies

This study is not without its limitations. First, given the intervention nature of this study, the researcher was compelled to conduct the class and administer the tests. This phenomenon is commonly known as "a novelty effect" and might have potentially exerted a negative effect on the outcome of this study. That is, the pupils' improved performance or achievement gain in English

vocabulary or Thainess knowledge might have been as a result of increased interest in the researcher or the novelty, not because of their actual improvement. However, to mitigate this novelty effect, throughout the intervention, the presence of a classroom English teacher was required. Therefore, it remains to be investigated whether a similar outcome would be achieved when the classroom teacher conducts classes.

The study has demonstrated that the pupils appeared to be able to get a good grasp of the meaning of the vocabulary exposed in the lessons. However, no performance assessment has yet been conducted to determine whether they can actually actively use the words learned in productive tasks or put them into practical use in English communication. Given the ultimate goal of any language learning is to be competent in communication, additional studies are needed to make sure that they can use the words learned productively and communicatively. A simulated tour guide task could be an activity to assess whether these young learners can integrate their Thainess and vocabulary knowledge effectively.

Over a relatively short period of time (10 weeks), this project was able to improve and enhance the learners' knowledge of both northern Thainess and English vocabulary. However, further research into the effectiveness of using such a system over a longer time span would be beneficial in terms of discovering how much of these additional bodies of knowledge could be maintained. It would also be of interest to discover more about the learners' understanding of their own identity as Thais, while being educated in English. As the learners in question progress, it would be of particular interest to find out how they deal with the twin prospects' of being Thai, and being exposed to further intercultural knowledge. Lastly, additional research work is needed to examine the influence of the Thainess-based lessons in encouraging and motivating the students to be actively and authentically engaged in the use of English both in a classroom context and also in real life.

In this particular study, since the learners in question were young, it was decided to focus on particularly solid and tangible aspects of northern Thainess which would be easier for the students to comprehend. For that reason, tourist attractions in the northern region were chosen. However, in the future, with older and more advanced students, it would be interesting to introduce more abstract concepts of northern Thainess, such as language, traditions, and customs. These additional cultural topics might be of greater interest to more mature students, and therefore more beneficial to them. Taking this concept one stage further, and as the maintenance of the Thai identity is of increasing importance, the idea of combining English language education with a greater knowledge of other regions of Thailand has a certain appeal. This might encourage communication between learners from different areas of the country, thus improving their knowledge of what it means to be Thai, while

improving their English communication skills at the same time. Should this happen, the twin concepts of learning about Thainess and learning about English, could dovetail successfully.

CONCLUSION

This study has proved that the hegemony of the English language does not necessarily undermine the nationalistic construction of the Thai identity. Against a number of scholars' speculations and concerns, indeed, English hegemony can be manipulated and embraced as a tool to support and strengthen Thailand's national and cultural identity in addition to fostering English language skills. As demonstrated, knowledge of both the English language and Thai identity can be mutually beneficial, creating quality Thai citizens and hopefully successful global citizens for the international community. Moreover, based on these northern Thai pupils' enhanced performances of English vocabulary associated with northern Thainess, the lessons developed are likely to boost these young learners' positive attitudes and motivation, thus yielding more satisfactory English learning outcomes. Pedagogically, this study represents an eye-opener, highlighting a possible and practical channel of empowering young learners' English. Additionally, the study sheds light on the positive impacts of northern Thainess-based English lessons as a venue for integrating other disciplines into the English lessons. The findings of this study may be of use and expanded to other educational levels of the entire paradigm so that English educators and policy makers can formulate their future policies and training programs in the field of English education. In this regard, a number of tasks, language activities, and language skills that are, for instance, more syntactically and lexically complex can be devised to accommodate different age groups of learners. In short, English can thus be used as a tool to reinforce and contribute to sustaining and revitalizing national identity and Thainess.

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