



# Effective English Language Learning

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims at exploring theories and views in terms of the factors affecting the effectiveness of the English language learning and teaching. First, the overview of the English language teaching context in Thailand is portrayed followed by characteristics of good language learners contributing to the success in language learning. Next, various problems facing Thai learners of English that can hinder the effectiveness of English instruction are discussed. Finally, major factors affecting language learning achievement (e.g. motivation, attitudes, learning styles, and learning strategies) are presented. It is hoped that the article can shed light on the English instruction especially in Thailand as well as will be beneficial to educators who want to better understand the learners' problems and improve their English instruction.

**Keywords:** *Language learning, English learning, Language learning and teaching, Thailand,*

## INTRODUCTION

English is considered one of the world's most important languages since it is one of the most widely used tools for learning and communication. In the information age, most of the information available in foreign textbooks and the internet is in English. Furthermore, in the time of globalization, English is widely accepted as a lingua franca of business and international communication.

In Thailand, the role of English is quite important as it is in many other developing countries. New technology and the adoption of the internet have resulted in a major transition in terms of business, education, science, and technological



progress, all of which demand high proficiency in English. With the economic downturn in Thailand a few years ago, a large number of Thai companies have embraced cooperation regionally and internationally. Mergers, associations, and takeovers are common and English is used as the means to communicate, negotiate and execute transactions by participants where one partner can be a native speaker of English or none of the partners are native speakers of English.

Therefore, apart from learning the first language or national language, learning English is required in Thailand. English is a required foreign language subject for Thai students in the basic education level. Students from grade one to twelve are registered to study English and pass it as a requirement for graduation. Moreover, English is one of the required subjects in the university entrance examination, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, throughout the country.

However, despite having English as a required subject, the Thai education system has failed in offering high quality education in English according to the report from ETS (2011). The Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL internet-based and paper-based tests (January 2010 – December 2010) shows the low rank in English proficiency of Thai examinees compared to the examinees from other countries in Southeast Asia (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, Myanmar, and Singapore). Thus, it can be said that up to now English language teaching in Thailand has not prepared Thais for the changing world. Thailand will lag behind in the competitive world of business, education, science and technology if the teaching and learning of English is not improved. Dr. Rom Hiranyapruek, director of Thai Software Park, made some comments concerning the importance of English and the problems of English language teaching in Thailand, that English is as important to the domain of information technology as other infrastructures. Thais have high proficiency in technology but because of our below average English competence, we cannot make much progress in terms of science and technology (Wiryachitra, n.d.).

It is therefore of crucial importance to improve Thai university students' English proficiency so that they can meet the demands of the changing world. Thus,



crucial components of effective English learning are investigated and presented in three major parts as follows:

1. Characteristics of good language learners
2. Problems of Thai learners of English
3. Factors affecting language learning achievement

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Rubin and Thompson (1994: 4) advocate that language learners are the most important factor in the language learning process. Whether they succeed or fail is dependent mainly on their learning behaviors. In the same classroom with the same language teacher, some learners can advance quickly while others progress slowly in learning. Good language learners are those who

- a) set clear goals. The learners have clear objectives for their language study, for example, how well they want to listen, speak, read, and write.
- b) establish a regular schedule. They set a regular schedule for language study and stick to it.
- c) plan to learn something new every day. The learners usually set up schedules for learning something new in addition to their classroom assignments.
- d) assess the difficulty of each task. The learners might consider the degree of task difficulty from how much time they spent and the information needed to complete the task.
- e) pay attention to their learning success. The learners always note down what they did to achieve their success. For example, pronouncing a new word out loud could help them remember the word better than reading it silently.
- f) pay attention to the learning success of others. The learners sometimes ask other classmates how they got the right answers or how they organized notes or word lists.



g) notice which strategies worked and which did not. The learners can identify which strategies worked or did not work for them.

Naiman et al. (1978 as cited in Ur, 1998: 275) assert that the most successful language learners are those who possess certain characteristics as follows:

- a) Positive task orientation. Learners are willing to try the tasks and challenges and are confident of their success.
- b) Ego-involvement. Learners value their learning success in order to keep and maintain their positive self-image.
- c) Need for achievement. Learners have a need to achieve and succeed in whatever they do.
- d) High aspiration. Learners have ambition and go for challenges, high proficiency, and top grades.
- e) Perseverance. Learners have a high level of learning effort and are not discouraged by setbacks.
- f) Tolerance of ambiguity. Learners are not frustrated by a temporary lack of comprehension or confusion. Instead, they are patient and confident that clear understanding will come later.

Successful language learners, in Harmer's (2004: 12-13) views, have some or all of these attributes.

- a) Willingness to listen to the taught content as well as to teacher's classroom language.
- b) Willingness to try and readiness to take risks in order to have chances to use the language.
- c) Willingness to ask when they do not understand.
- d) Willingness to find out their own learning methods such as note-taking and recording.
- e) Willingness to be corrected by teachers and being enthusiastic to follow their teachers' advice.



Moreover, Lightbown and Spada (2006: 54) elaborate that successful language learners:

- a) are willing and accurate guessers.
- b) try to get a message across even though specific language knowledge is not enough.
- c) are willing to make mistakes.
- d) constantly look for patterns in the language.
- e) practice as frequently as possible.
- f) analyze their own speech and the speech of others.
- g) pay attention to whether their performance meets the standards they have learned.
- h) enjoy doing grammar exercises.
- i) begin learning in childhood.
- j) have an above average IQ.
- k) have good academic skills.
- l) have a good self-image and lots of confidence.

### **PROBLEMS OF THAI LEARNERS OF ENGLISH**

According to Thailand's 1999 National Education Act, one of the education standards is for Thai learners to communicate in English correctly and appropriately. Therefore, English has become a compulsory subject from the primary level, secondary level to a higher level. Still, most Thai learners of English are not successful, facing many problems in their studies. Foley (2005) points out that the problems stem from cultural background as follows:

- a) Status and Respect. Thai learners are rather quiet in classroom as they are taught to pay respect to their teachers who have a high status as their second parents.
- b) 'Krengjai'. The combination of diffidence, deference, and consideration stops learners from asking their teachers to repeat an explanation.



An unhealthy degree of ‘Krengjai’ can lead to a lack of initiative, weakness and subservience or unquestioning obedience.

- c) Cross-cultural Pragmatics. The pragmatic cultural difference between Thai and English results in misunderstanding. It is no easy task to translate into the classroom the way the teachers and learners perceive different life styles and culture. For example, ‘good morning’ which can be translated by ‘arunswas’ in Thai is likely to make the speaker feel ‘pompous’. Good bye or ‘la-gorn’ is restricted to dramatic exchanges or rather formal events.

Foley mentions that the majority of Thai learners fail to achieve the standards required because of two more factors:

- a) More Thai than English in Class. Learners have little exposure to English as Thai is used about 80 % of the time in the classroom.
- b) University Entrance Examination. Most learners, who want to pass the university entrance examination which focuses only on reading and grammar, tend to ignore the listening, speaking, and writing skills.

The problems that Thai learners of English have faced are analyzed by Natepreeya Chumchaiyo (2002, as cited in Chakrit Phaisuwan, 2006: 6) as follows:

- a) Psychological Problems. These include being nervous when communicating with foreigners, being afraid of making mistakes and lacking confidence to speak or write English, as well as being shy to speak up, to ask the native speaker to speak slowly or to repeat, or to say ‘I don’t understand’.
- b) Pronunciation Problems. Learners mispronounce some consonant sounds such as /r/, /l/, or ending sounds of /ld/ and /ls/, stressed syllables, and intonation.



- c) Listening Problems. Learners are not accustomed to the native speakers' accent. They listen to vocabulary and analyze the sentence structure instead of imagining the story.
- d) Speaking Problems. Learners do not practice speaking English with emotional expression. They speak with a monotone sound which is not natural. Besides, they do not speak automatically (thinking in Thai and then translating into English).
- e) Reading Problems. Learners try to read every word instead of catching the key words. They lack the ability to understand the main idea and put too much emphasis on the details.
- f) Other Problems. These involve lacking knowledge of slang, idioms, proverbs, and tenses, as well as having rare opportunity to use English.

In addition, according to Thipawan Masaeng (1989, as cited in Worawan Wongsriwivat, 2007: 6), Thai learners confront the following problems:

- a) They have low motivation to study English.
- b) They seldom practice their English lessons.
- c) They do not have a good background of English.
- d) They have negative attitudes toward the English language.

## FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

The factors that influence the achievement of language learning include motivation, attitudes, learning styles, and learning strategies.

### 1. Motivation

According to Harmer (1997: 3) motivation is some kind of internal drive that encourages learners to study in order to reach the goals which are of two types, the short-term goals and the long-term goals. The short-term goals may consist of such things as wanting to pass a test or an examination, while the long term goals might involve a wish to get a better job or a desire to be able to communicate with a native



speaker. Moore (2001: 209) states that motivation can come from within or outside an individual. He therefore classifies it into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is the internal attributes that learners bring to the classroom such as attitudes, values, needs, and personality factors. Intrinsic motivation plays a vital role in most learners' success or failure in language learning. There are many factors affecting intrinsic motivation such as physical conditions of classrooms, teaching methods, and teachers' qualities.

Conversely, extrinsic motivation refers to external or environmental factors that help shape learner behaviors. Harmer (1997: 4) categorizes it into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. For the former kind, learners need to be attracted by the culture of the target language community (TLC) such as wishing to become a member of the TLC or at least desiring to know as much as possible about the culture of the TLC. For the latter kind, learners believe that learning a target language will enable them to get a better job, position, or status. The language is viewed as an instrument to reach a goal.

Ur (1998: 277) adds that global intrinsic motivation, which is the desire to invest effort in learning a language for its own sake, is largely rooted in the previous attitudes of the learners, whether they see the learning as worthwhile or whether they like the language.

In contrast, she explains that extrinsic motivation derives from the influence of some external incentive, unlike the wish to learn for its own sake or interest in tasks. Some sources of extrinsic motivation are beyond the teachers' influence such as the desire to please parents and the wish to pass an external exam. However, other sources are affected by teachers, for instance, success and its rewards, tests, and competitions.

## **2. Attitudes**

Rubin and Thompson (1994: 6) describe that attitudes are emotional traits relating to the way learners feel about the foreign culture and its people. Learners may admire the foreign culture and like the people who speak the language. These





stimulate them to learn more about the language. Therefore, the success of learning a foreign language has a definite relationship with positive attitudes. According to Brown (1994: 168) attitudes develop early in childhood and are influenced by the parents, peers, and other people who are different in a number of ways. These attitudes create a part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living. He views that language learners have both positive attitudes and negative attitudes. Their positive attitudes toward self, the native language, and the target language enhance proficiency. On the contrary, their negative attitudes, usually emerging either from false stereotyping or from unsuitable ethnocentrism, may lead to decreased motivation and in all likelihood to unsuccessful language learning.

However, negative attitudes can be changed, often by exposure to reality. Teachers can help clarify the myths about the foreign culture or people and replace those myths with a realistic understanding of other cultures as one that is different from the learners' culture, yet to be respected and valued. Moore (2001: 223) supports that it is one of the teachers' responsibilities to deal with negative attitudes and to try to make them positive. To reverse learners' negative mind-sets regarding language learning, teachers must show them that the target language is worthwhile and important to them. The more teachers involve learners in their learning and stimulate their interest, the more likely learners will be to see the importance of language learning and to develop more positive attitudes toward it.

### **3. Learning Styles**

According to Reid (1995, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006: 59) 'learning style' refers to a learner's natural, habitual, and favorite way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills. Reid (1998: ix) adds that learning styles are the inside characteristics, often unconsciously used by learners, for the intake and understanding of new information. Moore (2001: 30) views learning styles as the ways an individual learner begins to process, internalize, and concentrate on new materials.



Harthill and Busch (1998: 107) classify learning styles into four types as follows:

- a) Divergent Learning Style. Learners learn through concrete experience and reflective observation. Their strengths are having imagination and being aware of meaning and values.
- b) Assimilative Learning Style. Learners learn through abstract conceptualization. Their strengths are inductive reasoning and the ability to create theoretical models by mixing knowledge from different observations into an integrated explanation.
- c) Convergent Learning Style. Learners learn through abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Their strengths are problem solving, decision making, and the practical application of ideas.
- d) Accommodative Learning Style. Learners learn through concrete experience and active experimentation. Their strengths are doing things, carrying out plans and tasks, and getting involved in new experiences.

However, Dunn and Dunn (1993, as cited in Moore, 2001: 30) propose that learning styles are related to an individual's preference in four main areas:

- a) Environmental Area. Learners learn better when light, sound, temperature and physical room are preferable.
- b) Emotional Area. When involved in learning, learners show their persistence and responsibility as well as need a structural level and supervision.
- c) Sociological Area. When learning, learners need adult assistance or group support.
- d) Physical Area. In learning, learners need optimal movement, food intake, time of day, and sensory mode preference such as visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic.

Learners with different learning styles are likely to respond to learning situations differently as follows (Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 59):



- a) Some learners like to work independently, while others prefer working in a group.
- b) Some learners like to spend a lot of time planning before completing a task, while others spend a little time planning before they complete a task.
- c) Some learners can focus on only one task at a time, while others are able to do several different tasks at once.
- d) Some learners are uncomfortable in the situation where there is ambiguity or uncertainty, while others are able to handle such situations.
- e) Some learners are willing to take risks and make guesses when solving a problem, while others try to avoid taking risks.
- f) Some learners learn best when they use visual cues and write notes, while other learners learn better through an auditory mode.

It is concluded that every learner has one or more learning styles, strengths and weaknesses. Learning styles are a result of nature and nurture and they exist on wide continuums (Reid, 1998: xiv).

#### **4. Learning Strategies**

Rubin (1987: 19) and Hedge (2000: 75) both agree that learning strategies include any set of operations, steps, plans, and routines used by learners to ease the getting, storing, retrieving and using of information, Oxford (1990, as cited in Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 63) clarifies that learning strategies are specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations. Similarly, Reid (1998: ix) views learning strategies as external skills often consciously used by learners to improve their learning.

Learning strategies, according to Rubin (1987: 23) and Hedge (2000: 77) are divided into four types:

- a) Cognitive Strategies. They are the processes used directly by learners to help them deal with the information presented in tasks and materials.



- b) Metacognitive Strategies. They include planning for learning, thinking about how to make learning more effective, self-monitoring during learning, and evaluation of how successful learning has been.
- c) Communication Strategies. They are made up of learners' using gestures, mimes, synonyms, paraphrases, and words from their mother tongue which have the same origins as the English words to make themselves understood and maintain conversation.
- d) Socio-affective Strategies. They involve initiating conversation with native speakers, asking others about the language, working with others, listening to radio or watching TV programs in English, or spending extra time in the language laboratory.

Hedge (2000: 81) advocates that learners can be trained to employ learning strategies in order to make their learning effective. If learners are well-trained, they will possess some of these virtues:

- a) Confident in their ability to learn
- b) Self-reliant, motivated, and enthusiastic
- c) Aware of why they want to learn
- d) Unafraid of making mistakes and of what they don't know
- e) Good risk-takers and good guessers
- f) Having positive attitudes toward the English language and culture
- g) Good model perceivers
- h) Ready to look for opportunities to contact with the language
- i) Willing to be responsible for their learning

## 5. Beliefs

According to Richards and Lockhart (1994: 52) learners' beliefs are affected by the social context of learning and can influence the attitude toward the language itself and toward language learning in general. Moreover, their beliefs can affect their motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perception



about the ease or the difficulty with the language, as well as their favorite types of learning strategies.

Oranoot Cherdchoo and Jirada Wudthayakorn (2001) advocate that learners' beliefs are the foundation of attitudes. Learners who have positive and appropriate beliefs tend to enjoy language classes and feel positive toward language learning. Such beliefs and feelings cause them to conduct certain behaviors such as looking forward to the language class, finding chances to use the language, and wishing to further their language studies. Therefore, these language learners have a likelihood of success.

Learners' beliefs are divided by Richards and Lockhart (1994: 52) into:

- a) Beliefs about the nature of English in terms of difficulty, status, and importance.
- b) Beliefs about the speakers of English in terms of friendliness, and their grammar knowledge.
- c) Beliefs about the four language skills in terms of the nature of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the practice, and improvement of each skill.
- d) Beliefs about teaching in terms of teacher's knowledge, teaching methods, and teaching styles.
- e) Beliefs about language learning in terms of activities and approaches that promote learning.
- f) Beliefs about appropriate classroom behaviors in terms of using polite language, following rules and being disciplined.
- g) Beliefs about self in terms of ability to learn, confidence to talk to a native speaker, perception of their own strengths and weaknesses.
- h) Beliefs about goals in terms of short-term, long-term, and ultimate achievements.



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