

English language teaching in Thailand: Filipino teachers' experiences and perspectives

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English language teaching and learning is vital for the development of the country and its people. In Thailand, English language teaching has become one of the most popular jobs both for native and non-native English speaker-teachers. However, only a few studies have been conducted to identify and describe English language education in the Thailand. This study presents the experiences of 9 Filipino university and college English teachers and their perceptions on the teaching of English as a foreign language in Thailand. The method used was in-depth individual interviews. Findings reveal that although Filipino teachers were positive about teaching English to Thai students, they perceived that English language teaching in the country is a challenging task because of students' lack of interest in the English language; lack of exposure to and support for an English speaking environment; unclear and unsuitable English language curriculum; and lack of teacher professional development. Implications are discussed and suggestions for future studies are offered.

Introduction

The need to use English as a *lingua franca* in the ASEAN nations (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Baker, 2012; Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014) has brought changes in language education policies in the region. In Thailand alone, aside from the massive teacher training and other teacher development programs, a number of native and non-native English speaking teachers have been hired and employed by most private and public schools and universities around the country (Hickey, 2014) to reform their language instruction, strengthen bilingual programs, and improve the English language proficiency of their students (Ulla, 2017). Even if most of these schools and universities prefer to employ native English speaking teachers (UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), there is still a number of non-native English speaking teachers who are hired to help the local Thai teachers teach English. Among the non-native English speaking teachers who are teaching in Thailand, Filipinos are on the list. The hiring of these Filipinos as ASEAN local-teachers to teach English in the region adds up to an increase of the non-native English language teachers (Floris, 2013) and to a growing number of immigrants in Thailand.

Recent research studies on international teacher mobility and migration have explored some reasons behind this exodus. For example, teachers who left their own country were disappointed by their own country's educational system (Sharma, 2012). They wanted to have better living conditions for their family abroad (Oloo, 2012); and they wanted to flee from political turmoil in their home country (Collins & Reid, 2012). Some studies also reported the experiences that these migrant teachers faced when they came to their destination countries. A culture shock and cultural disagreement both in the classroom and in the workplace (Bailey, 2013), racial discrimination (Savva, 2017), demanding working conditions (Bense, 2014), language barriers (Abramova, 2013), and dissatisfaction

and unhappiness that separated them from the rest of the people in the host school (Fimyar, 2017) were among the common challenges and issues that teacher-immigrants encountered. A more positive experience by the immigrant teachers has been that of being able to share with the local teachers their own culture and language (Gu & Canagarajah, 2017). Given the growing number of teacher migration studies that focused on experiences, challenges, and opportunities of migrant teachers in different countries, more research studies that concentrate on teacher migration in the same region and its implications for the improvement of the language education, particularly in the ASEAN region, are needed.

In this context, looking into the teaching conditions for Filipino teachers and the challenges and issues regarding teaching English in the ASEAN region are important. However, only a few studies have concentrated on this area in the region and in the whole of Asia. Thus, it is the purpose of this paper to present the experiences of the Filipinos as migrant, non-native English speaking-teachers, who come from the same region, and who share similar linguistic backgrounds (Kirkpatrick, 2014) with other people in the region. Looking into the teaching conditions of the Filipino teachers, the challenges and issues regarding teaching English in Thailand will reveal implications for the improvement of language education, not only in Thailand but also for all the nations in the region. Understanding the need for English in the region as a regional language and the demands on teaching and learning it, from the perspectives of Filipinos as migrant teachers, will shed light on issues in English language teaching in the ASEAN context, where native English speakers are preferred over the non-native English speaking teachers (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2014).

Filipino English teachers in Thailand

Generally, Filipinos, being the third largest source of international migrants after China and India (Nicolas, 2011), come to Thailand with the hope of improving their economic status and to support their families back in the Philippines. They constitute one of the biggest groups of foreign teachers teaching in the country (Knell, 2017). Although they are considered non-native English speaking people, since English is only their second language, they have found opportunities to work in Thailand (Ulla, 2017). With their fluency in English, they are seen teaching English, science, mathematics, and computer subjects in kindergarten, elementary, secondary, tertiary, and language center classrooms in the country.

Among the many reasons why Filipinos seek better employment abroad is the lack of employment opportunities and low salary rates in their home country (Frederiksen, 2014). The same findings have been obtained by Ulla (2017) concerning Filipinos as non-native English speaking teachers (NonNESTs) in Thailand. His findings revealed that one of the common reasons why Filipino teachers come to teach in Thailand is that the Philippines suffers from a lack of employment options. While Frederiksen (2014) reported some of the challenges (e.g. the language barrier, homesickness, and lower salary rates compared to native speaking teachers) that were revealed in her study on Filipino teacher migration, Ulla (2017) stated that Filipino teachers in Thailand had a positive perception towards

teaching English, as they had better salary rates and opportunities compared to when they were teaching in their home country. Accordingly, teaching in Thailand has developed more of the teaching skills of these Filipino teachers. Thus, a growing number of Filipinos are coming to Thailand to work. To date, there are already more than 16,000 Filipinos who are living and working in Thailand; and most of them are teachers (Novio, 2014). This number does not yet include those Filipinos who are undocumented and who left the Philippines as tourists but later on have found and applied for jobs in Thailand.

English language teaching in Thailand

English is not widely spoken or used in Thailand. In schools and universities, English is not used as a medium of instruction. This is the reason why some Thai students have difficulty speaking and understanding the language. Even if the English language has been introduced to them since they were in their primary years at school (Kaewmala, 2012; Noom-ura, 2013), it has been unsuccessful and ineffective (Kongkerd, 2013; Noom-ura, 2013). This is manifested in their low language proficiency scores in TOEFL (Educational Testing Service, 2010) compared to people from other nations in the region (Noom-ura, 2013). In a test data and score summary released by the Educational Testing Service (2010) for TOEFL Internet and paper-based tests, Thailand consistently trailed behind other Southeast Asian countries with an average score of 75 out of 120 for Internet-based tests and 486 out of 660 for paper-based tests. This low to zero English proficiency level of Thai students is generally associated with the kind of English language teaching and learning they received in their classrooms.

In the literature, some studies have mentioned a number of factors why English language learning in Thai classrooms is unproductive. Firstly, while teachers in Thailand are delivering the lessons in their local language, they tend to focus more on grammar (Simpson, 2011). Secondly, there is a lack of confidence and a lack of speaking opportunities for the students to practise their English language communication skills (Noom-ura, 2013). Thirdly, there is a lack of qualified teachers to teach English, as most of these teachers do not have a degree in English (Dhanasobhon, 2006). Lastly, English lessons are conducted in a teacher-centred classroom, making the students passive learners (Wiriyachitra, 2002). With these factors contributing to the English language education problem in the country, the Thai government and its education institutions are working to address these issues. Bringing in some foreign English teachers to help the local teachers teach English and other subjects is seen as one of the best ways to improve English language education in Thailand.

Related studies

The following are related studies concentrating on native and non-native English speaking teachers who have been teaching in some parts of Asia and in the ASEAN region. However, numbers of these studies are limited. Only a few studies address NonNESTs, one of the more relevant was done by Frederiksen (2014) who found that Filipino teachers chose to work abroad because of better salary rates and working environments. Some of the challenges that were revealed in her study included the language barrier,

homesickness, and lower salary rates compared to native speaking teachers. Similarly, Hickey (2014) interviewed African and Filipino foreign teachers in Eastern and Northeastern Thailand. She found that these teachers were not able to get a teaching job in the country's capital due to their non-native English speaking status. She also suggested that racism, discrimination in the workplace, and lower salary rates were the common issues and problems faced by these teachers. Students' preferences for being taught by NES and NonNES teachers was explored by Walkinshaw and Duong (2012) in Vietnam. They found that students preferred the NES teachers of English since they believed that native speakers possessed an ideal English pronunciation model, and that native speaking teachers were better English language teachers. Walkinshaw and Duong (2014) also examined student perceptions of native and non-native English teachers in Japan and Vietnam. It was found that NESTs were perceived to be good models of the English language, but deficient at grammar lesson discussion. The non-NESTs, on the other hand, were perceived to be more effective in teaching grammar lessons.

In Thailand, the hiring of foreign teachers both native and non-native has become a popular research topic in the field of language education. Although there have been no claims yet that prove students learn English better with a NEST or a NonNEST (Grubbs, Jantarach & Kettem, 2010), a number of studies have explored students' perceptions and attitudes towards learning English with either a NEST or a NonNEST. In most of these studies, conducted in Thai classrooms, students seemed to have a more positive attitude and perception towards a native English speaking teacher over a non-native English teacher. For example, in a study conducted by Grubbs, Jantarach and Kettem (2010), although it was reported that a number of the students expressed preference for a NEST to teach them pronunciation, reading, speaking, and listening, there were a few students who preferred a Thai teacher to teach them grammar and writing. Similarly, the study of Phothongsunan (2016), on Thai university students' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers, revealed that students favoured the NESTs to be their English language teachers over the Thai local teachers of English. Watson Todd and Pojanapunya (2009) also claimed in their study that students expressed their preference to be taught by a NEST rather than a NonNEST.

While the above-mentioned studies have explored students' perceptions and attitudes both for NESTs and NonNESTs in Thailand, only a few studies have focused on students' perceptions of NonNESTs, and NonNESTs' perceptions and experiences in teaching English in Thailand. The study conducted by Thunnayok (2015), though revealing students' positive attitudes towards NonNESTs, failed to discuss the NonNESTs' experiences and perceptions of teaching English in Thailand. Thus, it is the aim of this paper to bridge this gap in the literature. This present study attempts to identify the experiences of Filipinos as migrant teachers in Thailand, with regards to teaching English, and language education in the country and in the whole region. It addresses the research question:

What are the experiences of Filipinos as non-native English speaking teachers teaching English in Thailand, concerning:

- a. Thai EFL students;

- b. English language classroom;
- c. English language education conditions; and
- d. professional development.

Method

This study is a qualitative research that relies heavily on in-depth interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013) as the main tool in data collection. It made use of interview guidelines (e.g. a set of open style questions) to ensure that the responses would address the research questions from Filipinos as ASEAN local-migrant English teachers in Thailand. This research design was chosen to explore and describe the experiences of these Filipino teachers as non-native English speaker-teachers. This study was conducted between the months of March and June 2017.

Participants

A total of 9 Filipino English teachers (2 females, 7 males) who were teaching in colleges and universities in Thailand participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 33 to 45, total years of teaching experience ranged from 5 to 17 years in Thailand and the Philippines, and they were teaching different English courses to first-year university and/or college students. Two Filipino teachers held doctorate degrees in language education; while 7 held masters degrees in English language and education. Qualitative purposive sampling (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2013) was used in the study. The sampling criteria were that the Filipino English teachers had to be teaching English in Thailand for over a year, were teaching English to university or college students, had an English teaching or language education degree, and had at least three years teaching experience in the Philippines and in Thailand.

Data collection

The researcher identified some nearby universities and colleges before he visited them to ascertain the number of Filipino English teachers. Two universities and one college had employed Filipino English teachers. An informal initial interview was conducted with the teachers at the time of the visit. Questions related to participants' teaching conditions, the challenges they faced, and their EFL students were asked. Although these data were excluded from the final analysis, they formed as the basis for an in-depth interview from which the findings of the study were developed.

Participants were informed about the study and their consent to be part of it was sought. After they agreed, their contact numbers were asked in order to schedule an in-depth interview at a convenient time. Data collection took 9 weeks (1 week per participant) as the participants were only available during the weekends. Although there was no time limit, the interviews lasted between 35-60 minutes and were held in different places and various times. Interviews were in English and centred on the respondents' English teaching experience and conditions in Thailand, including the issues, challenges, and

problems. Lastly, the interview findings were coded and grouped according to the themes that were developed throughout the course of the analysis.

Data treatment

Data collected from the interviews were treated in confidence and only the researcher has access to it. Participants were informed about and assured of their anonymity throughout the conduct of the study.

Interviews were audio-recorded through the use of a mobile phone. Although the questions were asked in English, some teachers answered in the Filipino language. Thus, the audio texts were transcribed and translated into English. All the data were then subjected to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and categorised according to the themes developed from the analysis. The transcripts were read carefully and repetitively to identify these themes and were categorised and arranged according to the research questions posed for this study.

Results

Four main themes, with excerpts quoted from the interview to highlight the experiences of these teachers, were developed for this study, as posted in the research questions. These four main themes included Thai EFL students, English language classroom, English language education conditions in Thailand, and professional development. Sub-themes were also formed based on the data gathered from the interview. These sub-themes were respect, and English language learning interest, which fall under the main theme of Thai EFL students.

For the purpose of data presentation, only the initials of their last names and their ages were included in the quotations below.

Thai EFL students

a. Respect

All of the nine (9) participants held a positive perception of their students. They noted that all of their students respected them, even if they were coming from a neighboring country and even if they were non-native English speaking teachers. One of the teacher-participants mentioned,

Even if the colour of my skin is brown and I speak English as my second language, Thai university students are very respectful. They always greet me with a *wai* anywhere they see me. It is very gratifying to know that these students, although I do not speak the same language as them, they still treat me like the way how they treat their local teachers [A, 36 years]

My students always address me with “teacher”, “ajarn”, and “khrub” or “kha”. These words are signs of respect and I always get these whenever I see my students or they see me anywhere [J, 42 years]

I do not have a problem with my students and I do not have a behavioural issue with them. They are just so awesome. I respect them as my students, and in return, they also respect me as their teacher. I guess it is on the way how you treat them [N, 43 years]

b. English language learning interest

Although seven of the participants perceived that their students were motivated to learn English, two revealed that they had students who showed no interest in learning English. When they were asked about the reasons why, a female teacher stated,

In my class, I could really tell among my students those who are very keen on learning the language and those who are not. Personally, I could say that some of them have no interest in the learning the language since they find it difficult to learn. [S, 35 years]

They find learning and expressing themselves in English difficult. They were used to being taught in their own language, and they see no value in learning the language since most of them said that they did not have plans to work and/or live abroad [W, 45 years]

This was supported by another female teacher [B, 33 years] who said,

I have one student who said that she does not need to learn English. When I asked her why she told me that she has no plans for living abroad. She just wants to live and work in her own country where English is not widely spoken.

However, one male teacher [K, 38] also stated that a number of his Pharmacy and Medical Science students were keen on learning English. He said that most of his students wanted to be good at their profession in the future so they wanted to be proficient in the English language.

English language classroom

Teacher-participants also revealed that in order to motivate their students to learn the English language and to engage them with the teaching and learning materials, they had to prepare interactive activities that were easy for students to do. One male teacher maintained that,

Although we use textbooks, I always have games and other interactive activities in my class. I believe that since these students have difficulty understanding and expressing themselves in English, it is best to put them in situations where they need to practise using the language [D, 40 years].

Traditional classroom discussion or teacher-centred classroom is not for Thai students. They need to be engaged in different activities where the use of the English language is practiced [W, 45 years]

The moment I entered into my class, my students would already know that I brought with me some group work activities, ice-breaking activities, and interactive class discussion [J, 42 years]

It is a good thing and of help that all of my English classrooms are equipped with technology. I can easily make use of them to make my English lessons interactive [R, 34 years]

Other teachers also reported that they have been learning the local language in order to connect to and promote mutual understanding between their students. One teacher [K, 38 years] disclosed,

Sometimes, when things get tough in the classroom, I speak their language. It is easier to communicate to the students if you know their language. Although English is still the language of instruction, Thai language can be used when there is a need to use it in the classroom.

English language education conditions

Teacher-participants were also asked about their perceptions on the language education and the condition of the English language in the country. Teacher [A, 36] stated that,

I think the problem here is that English teaching is only confined within the four walls of the classroom. When students go out, they are never reinforced and exposed to English speaking environment. Everything is in their local language from signposts to TV [A, 36].

Students lack exposure to English speaking environment. They only get to practice and learn English in the classroom. They don't even use English when speaking to their classmates and friends outside of the classroom. English is not even used as a medium of instruction in most of the courses in the university. I think what is needed to be done here is that there should be a total English language support from the outside. In this way, students will be exposed to the use of English in their daily lives [J, 42].

I think teaching basic communication skills to university students is too late for their age already. Rigid English language teaching should be done while they were still in their primary years at school. While it is still good to learn English at the university level, the focus of English language teaching should now be higher. At my university, I am teaching English lessons that should be taught and learned only by students who are in their primary years at school. I cannot blame the university since our students really have a low English language proficiency [D, 40].

At my university, students are required to take 4 General English courses. And all these courses have nearly the same content and focus. In other words, students are not introduced to different language skills.... If we want to see improvement in the language learning of our students, they should be offered and taught with other language skills [K, 38].

I think there is a need to revisit and or revise the curriculum here especially on the English language courses as these are not seen to be effective in motivating and promoting learners' English language learning [B, 33].

Professional development

Seven participants during interviews voiced their needs to have a professional development program. They said that they needed support from their school heads to enhance their teaching skills and to deal with their students who study English as a foreign language.

I think what we need as foreign English teachers in Thailand is teacher training.... To help us cope with the challenging job of EFL teaching, professional development programs that will centre on foreign teachers' teaching capabilities should be made available [N, 43].

As an EFL teacher here, I think I should know more about the culture of the people so as to understand my students.... The school should be able to provide us some basic training programs on culture awareness [B, 33].

Teaching EFL to Thai students is really challenging... I think what I need is more training on how to teach and deal with EFL students.... My background is ESL teaching and although there is a little difference, I still think language teaching training in EFL context is needed [S, 35].

Discussion

This study reports on the experiences of Filipino English teachers who were teaching the English language in Thailand. From the findings, Filipino teachers held a positive perception of their Thai EFL students. Although the literature reported that EFL students preferred to be taught by native English speaking-teachers (Songsirisak, 2015; Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012; Walkinshaw & Duong, 2014), teacher-participants maintained that their students respected them as non-native English speaking teachers. However, it must be noted that respect and preference are two different terms. While it is true that students respect them as their teacher, it does not mean that they prefer them over the native English speaking teachers. This kind of study must be carried out in the future to investigate whether or not there is a correlation between respect and preference of Thai students for native and English speaking teachers. Furthermore, in Thai classroom contexts, where there are a number of native and non-native English speaking teachers teaching, respect can still be the most important behaviour needed by teachers in order to deliver lessons efficiently in English teaching and learning classrooms.

However, there seems to be a big challenge faced by a number of Filipino language teachers of English teachers, in particular in Thailand. Students' English language learning interest is a key factor for successful language learning, but students seem to have lacked of it. The perceived low interest in students' learning of English as revealed in the interview findings showed that some Thai students, though not all, found no value in learning English. Common reasons were that they did not need English in Thailand and they did not have plans to work abroad, or live abroad. In a study conducted by Hayes (2016), 14% of his Thai student-respondents held a negative perception towards learning English. They stated that English was too difficult to learn and they did not see the economic value of learning English for their future careers. Most of these students did not want to work abroad where English is required. Hence, there was no need for them to learn English. This negative attitude of the students towards the English language might be one of the reasons why Thailand is lagging behind neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in English language proficiency (Educational Testing Service, 2010).

It must be noted, however, that the reported lack of interest of the students in learning the English language can be cultural and personal. Thailand is the only country in the

ASEAN region which was not colonised by the West. This historical data gives a clear picture why some Thai people may lack motivation and interest in learning English. Likewise, students who actually find learning the English language valuable for them in their future careers are among the only ones who have a strong interest in learning the language. In the present study, pharmacy students were perceived to have a high interest in the English language learning. Other studies (Kitjaroonchai & Kitjaroonchai, 2012; Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018) have reported that students in nursing and medicine, and English major students have a high interest in learning the English language as they see the need of it in their future professions.

Generally, when students lack the interest in learning the language, teachers have to play a very crucial role in the classroom to make their students value the importance of learning the English language. As Filipino English teachers in Thailand, these teacher-participants have exposure to English as a foreign language teaching, as they became used to teaching English as a second language back in the Philippines. As reported in the study, they wanted to develop and grow professionally in their profession. Therefore, these teachers need continuous professional training to update their skills, especially in the context of EFL teaching. Research studies on teacher training (Kagoda, & Sentongo, 2015; Nenty, Moyo & Phuti, 2015; Ulla, 2017; 2018) showed that training teachers in modern era teaching methodologies will equip them necessary skills in contemporary English language teaching.

Nevertheless, based on the findings, teachers revealed that they have been making their English language classrooms an exciting place to learn English by having interactive activities and games. Some of the many ways that teacher-participants employed in their classroom as reported in the study were developing and creating a non-threatening, interactive, and exciting English learning environment, and learning the local language to connect and relate with the students. Amjah (2014) mentioned that teaching English to students is quite tasking for teachers, especially if students do not have an interest in that learning. Thus to make the language learning fun and enjoyable, teachers should have effective teaching strategies for the students. This includes using ICT, games, interactive activities, and other relevant, exciting materials for language teaching. In this way, students' interest and motivation to learn English is stimulated and enhanced.

Another important finding from the study is the condition of English language teaching and education in Thailand as perceived by the participants. It was revealed that there was little support or reinforcement of the learning of English outside the classroom. English is not spoken outside the classrooms and it is not widely used in television, newspapers, signage, and billboards. Thus, students have insufficient knowledge of and a lack of exposure to English language environments. However, it must be noted that the participants' perceptions point to difficulties in recognising and dealing effectively with the fact that English needs to be taught as a 'foreign language' in Thailand. Teaching English as a foreign language may be a challenge for them but this also supports the respondents' requests for professional development to assist in addressing these and other issues in their classroom pedagogy.

Furthermore, unsuitable English language curriculum also adds to the problem. A study by Souriyavongsa, Rany, Abidin and Mei (2013) reported that lack of exposure, unsuitable curriculum, and English not in use as a medium of instruction were some factors why students in Laos have low English proficiency. Exposure to the language may help students in learning and acquiring the skills in the English language, as evidenced by a number of researchers (Ferdous, 2013; Olmedo, 2015; Pascual, 2017; Tonoian, 2014). All found that exposure to English speaking environments is a contributing factor towards learning the language.

Although the present study reported the experiences and perceptions of Filipino English teachers concerning teaching English in Thailand, the findings may not be fully representative of Filipino teachers and other nationalities teaching English in the country. First, only a relatively small number of Filipino teachers were interviewed. Second, the researcher used interviews as his only research instrument. Lastly, only those teachers teaching at the university and or college level were considered for the study. Future research studies should concentrate on a larger sample size and on other nationalities teaching in Thailand, in order to gain a more extensive understanding of the English language teaching situation in the country. Other research studies may consider comparing the experiences of other foreign teachers teaching English around Southeast Asian countries to further identify and describe language education in the ASEAN region.

Conclusion

This study presents the experiences of Filipino teachers including some issues and challenges on the teaching of English as a foreign language in Thailand. Findings revealed that although Filipino teachers were positive about teaching English to Thai students, they perceived that English language teaching in the country is a challenging task because of the following factors; students' lack of interest in the English language, lack of exposure to and support for an English speaking environment; unclear and unsuitable English language curriculum; and lack of teachers' professional development.

The experiences of these Filipino English language teachers and their perspectives on teaching in Thailand provided a new light on issues in English language teaching in the country. Although teaching and learning of English has always been emphasised by the government, more work must be done in order to make the English language education in the country successful. This involves giving continuous support for all foreign language teachers, both native and non-native English speaking teachers in the country. Professional development for all teachers must be considered, especially as EFL teaching may be a taxing job for non-EFL teachers, or for those teachers who do not have an experience in teaching EFL students. Additionally, support for English language learning must also be given to the students. This includes students' continual exposure to the use of English language, curriculum revision, and the use of English as the medium of classroom instruction. The implications of this study are not addressed only to the schools and other education institutions in Thailand and in the ASEAN region where English is mostly taught as a foreign language. It is also for the government to consider the

experiences and perceptions of foreign English language teachers with regard to improving language education in the country.

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