Celebrating Local, Going Global:
Use of Northern Thainess-Based English Lessons

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In response to the growing interest in the use of local culture in English language teaching (ELT), this current study highlights the positive impacts of northern Thainess-based instructional materials on learners’ English learning. With a focus on the northern region of Thailand, a set of instructional innovations for English elementary education was developed based on the context of northern Thainess as voiced by the community through the completion of a questionnaire. The innovations were subsequently implemented in a Grade 4 class (N=49), aiming at instilling northern Thainess cultural awareness in young learners and providing them with an opportunity to practise speaking English in authentic contexts. The success of the instruction and the use of innovations were assessed by a pre/post-test on northern Thainess and a simulated tour guide task performed by these young learners. Both the significant improvement in the learners’ northern Thainess knowledge and the satisfactory level to which they could successfully perform the role of a tour guide were reported. On the basis of these key findings, insightful pedagogical implications and future research suggestions are provided.

Keywords: northern Thainess, culture, instructional innovations, tour guide task, speaking practise

Introduction

Despite the importance of culture in ELT, the debate over what cultural contents should be most effectively incorporated into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching materials has been of interest to many researchers for decades (e.g., Jahan & Roger, 2006; Kachru, 1985, 1992; McKay, 2003). To provide an insight into this issue, different approaches have been adopted to examine the categories of cultures presented in EFL materials and their impacts on learners. Among others, the three-concentric-circle model for the global diversity of English developed by Kachru (1985, 1992) has been extensively applied (e.g., Hanashiro, 2016; Jahan & Roger, 2006; Roohani & Molana, 2013). Based on this model, cultural contents in EFL teaching materials can be categorised into three main groups: the Inner Circle for cultures of English-speaking countries, the Outer Circle for cultures of the countries where English is spoken as a second language, and the Expanding Circle for cultures of the countries where English is used as a foreign language. Similarly, three patterns of how EFL materials reflect cultures as proposed by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) have been widely employed (e.g., Aliakbari, 2004; Munandar & Ulwiyah, 2012; Syahri & Susanti, 2016). In Cortazzi and Jin’s (1999) terms, the three categories of cultural information in
English teaching materials are the target cultures or the cultures of English-speaking countries, the source cultures or learners’ own cultures, and the international cultures or a great variety of cultures from both English and non-English speaking countries.

Regardless of different approaches taken, two widespread and opposing views regarding culture in ELT can be identified. One is that the Inner Circle or the target cultures (mostly British or American) should be exclusively taught along with the English language (e.g., Byram, 1990; Byram & Flemming, 1998; Jiang, 2000; McDevitt, 2004). As reported by a number of scholars (e.g., Boda, 2000; Tanaka, 1997; Willems, 1996), the need to incorporate the target culture into ELT mainly arises from the fact that most learners, without being exposed to cultural contexts, may face some difficulties in communicating meaning to native speakers, even when they are using the correct linguistic forms. It is therefore essential for EFL learners to acquire both a language and its culture in order to avoid becoming what Bennett (1993) called a “fluent fool” - a person who speaks a foreign language well but does not understand the culture of that language (p. 16).

However, the new status of English as an international language (EIL) has led to significant changes in the relationship between culture and ELT. Instead of relying solely on the Inner Circle or the target cultures, more diverse cultural contents should be incorporated to develop learners as intercultural speakers in a globalised context (e.g., Alptekin, 2005; Chinh, 2013; Ho, 2009; McKay, 2003; Prastiwi, 2013; Prodromou, 1992; Wei, 2005). Within this view, the important role played by the source culture or learners’ local culture has been extensively discussed. From a cognitive perspective, learners will not only be motivated, but they will also find it much easier to learn English from local cultural contents that are directly in line with their schema or prior knowledge (e.g., Guariento & Morley, 2001; Kristiawan, 2012; Nault, 2006; Rowsell, Sztainbok, & Blaney, 2007). Also, this practice helps turn learners into better intercultural speakers since it enables them to develop insight into their own culture and compare it to the cultures of others (e.g., Byram, 1991; Chinh, 2013; Corbett, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Wei, 2005; Yeganeh & Raeesi, 2015; Zhengzheng, 2014).

Taking into account advantages of the local cultural contents, this study revisits the role of localised materials in instilling local cultural awareness in young learners and providing them with an opportunity to practise speaking English in authentic contexts. This objective was accomplished through the implementation of a set of northern Thainess-based instructional innovations developed for elementary English education in the northern region of Thailand. The lessons covered a wide range of topics representing northern Thainess as determined by community members. The instructional innovations were then implemented in a Grade 4 class (N=49) as an intervention for their regular English classes. A pre/post-test was constructed and administered to measure the learners’ northern Thainess knowledge. To give them an opportunity to practise speaking English in authentic contexts, a tour guide simulation task was also performed by the learners. The learners’ significant knowledge gain for local culture along with their ability to satisfactorily put the content and language provided to practical and authentic use indicated the positive effect of the northern Thainess-based instructional innovations. With their exposure to the localised teaching materials and engagement in classroom activities, these learners could make full use of their existing background information to build up their English speaking skills.

**Literature Review**

This section describes previous studies focusing particularly on two main areas: 1) culture learning and teaching in ELT; and 2) use of localised materials in an EFL context.

**Culture Learning and Teaching in ELT**

As established by decades of research, language and culture are closely related (e.g., Kuang, 2007; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2005; Wei, 2005) and are best acquired concurrently (e.g., Jiang, 2000; Mishan, ...
2005; Schulz, 2007). These scholars’ views substantiate what Brown (1994) emphasised about the impossibility to learn a language without its culture by stating that:

[A] language is part of culture; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition …, is also the acquisition of second culture. (p. 165)

This concept is also in agreement with Mishan (2005), who asserted that the nature of the culture-language relationship does not allow for their isolated study. Additionally, Moore (2006) maintained that cultural learning and communication should be considered instructional objectives with equal importance.

In response to the above notion, English speaking cultures have been highlighted in ELT. Several possible explanations have been provided to account for this. For example, according to Sárdi (2002), the assumption that children’s language and cultural knowledge develop concurrently in their native language learning has led to the belief that no language, be it second or foreign, can be learned separately from the culture to which it belongs. On the other hand, Chinh (2013) argued that culture teaching has been constructed on the paradigm of a target culture because the concept of native speaker competence was used to prescribe all aspects of ELT. As a result, one of the practical aims of teaching English is to provide learners with knowledge about English speaking cultures, mainly Great Britain and United States.

Additionally, the role of a target culture in helping EFL learners to become proficient in English has been strongly emphasised (Boda, 2000; Tanaka, 1997; Willems, 1996). Broadly speaking, it is believed that language learners cannot be proficient in the target language if they know nothing about the people who speak the language or the country in which the language is spoken (Genc & Bada, 2005). In order to use language effectively, it is then not enough for EFL learners to develop linguistics knowledge, but they also need to know how to use the language in a situated context (Neuner, 1997; Silberstein, 2001). Sometimes linguistically correct sentences could cause misunderstanding or confusion when they are used in different cultural contexts (Schulz, 2007). To guarantee effective and appropriate communication, EFL learners therefore need to develop an in-depth understanding of the culture embedded in the language – a skill by which Kramsch (1993) referred to as the fifth skill to master, in addition to listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

However, the focus on English speaking cultures has been challenged by the growth of EIL. As noted by a number of scholars, English users in the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries, where English is used as a second or foreign language, have significantly exceeded the native speakers in the Inner Circle countries (Chinh, 2013; Graddol, 1997; Munandar & Ulwiyyah, 2012). English is now widely used for global communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, often far removed, in both distance and in beliefs and values, from those of native English speaking countries (Baker, 2003; Zhengzheng, 2014). As a consequence, the use of the target culture in ELT has eventually been considered inappropriate for English use in multilingual and multicultural contexts. It falsely promotes the assumption that native speakers are the only representatives and owners of the language (Alptekin, 1993; Sárdi, 2002), resulting in a form of cultural hegemony and imposing on learners the view that the target culture is superior to their own (Gray, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

In line with the new status of the English language, the intercultural approach to ELT has been widely adopted (Byram & Zarate, 1997; Chinh, 2013; Corbett, 2003; Munandar & Ulwiyyah, 2012). This intercultural approach, according to Paige et al. (2003), maintains that learning culture is the process by which the learners acquire both the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge for effective communication with people from other cultures. While the culture-specific learning pertains to knowledge, skills, and attitudes of people in a particular cultural group, the culture-general approach refers to those concepts relevant to universal and cross-cultural phenomena. Cultural contents in ELT based on this model are therefore no longer confined to the paradigm of the target culture, but to a variety of cultural contents throughout the world. Through this approach, learners are expected to develop their
cross-cultural awareness, embrace the ability to understand any linguistic and cultural variation of English users, be sensitive to the world’s many cultural systems, and show tolerance towards diversity and otherness (Chinh, 2013; Corbett, 2003; Munandar & Ulwiyah, 2012; Prodromou, 1992).

**Use of Localised Materials in an EFL Context**

Given the need to integrate diverse cultures into ELT, one of the main focuses of the intercultural approach is the inclusion of learners’ local culture (McKay, 2003; Tomlinson, 2012). As observed by many scholars, the first crucial step towards becoming an intercultural speaker is to have knowledge of one’s own culture in the first place and then an understanding across cultures (e.g., Chinh, 2013; Corbett, 2003; Graddol, 2006). Accordingly, the use of local cultural contents in ELT does not only allow learners to gain a better insight into their own culture but also enable them to make use of it to compare and contrast the values and identity of their own culture with those of others, leading to what Byram (1991) called “a modification of mono-cultural awareness” (p. 19).

At the cognitive level, this practice has been deemed highly beneficial, facilitating learners through a process of acquiring a new language (Alptekin 1993; Nault 2006). According to Alptekin (1993), the effective use of any given language generally involves two types of knowledge; systemic knowledge (the knowledge of language) and schematic knowledge (the knowledge of content). Both are said to develop concurrently in native language learning, with each being supportive of the other. However, in an EFL context, the learning process is quite different, as the learners have already been socialised, gaining the schematic knowledge associated with their own mother tongues. Thus, the use of local culture can be regarded as a great help in reducing what Khan (2016) termed the “double burden” (p. 99) of learning a new language in an unfamiliar context, enabling them to become more engaged and motivated in learning from content relevant to their schema (Khan, 2016; Kristiawan, 2012; Rowsell et al., 2007).

Despite its benefits, local cultural content has often been marginalised in favour of target cultural content in commercial textbooks (Roohani & Molana, 2013; Yuen, 2011; Ziaei, 2012). This has led to a growing interest in localisation – a term that Mishan and Timmis (2015) defined as the production of local materials within and for non-Inner Circle contexts in which English is used but which are relatively neglected in global course books. As Mishan and Timmis (2015) further exemplified, localised materials can be constructed by situating English language learning within familiar cultural reference points: either by using concrete (national events, landmarks, celebrities) or abstract notions (values, ambitions, family relationships). This localisation trend is discernible in various countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Taiwan. In Indonesia, for example, local culture has been incorporated into ELT in accordance with the government’s education policy (Munandar & Ulwiyah, 2012; Prastiti, 2013; Syahri & Susanti, 2016). While Kirkpatrick (2007) emphasised that the use of localised materials fulfils the goal of preparing Indonesian learners to talk about their own cultures in English, Royani (2013) pointed out that local cultural texts effectively stimulate learners’ motivation in a reading class. Prastiti (2013) further added that localised materials serve a dual purpose: supporting learner’s mastery of the target language while also enabling teachers to fulfil their obligation to teach about local culture, thus forging the spirit of “Unity in Diversity” as prescribed in Indonesia’s national motto.

In the Thai EFL context, the need for localised materials has also been addressed. In his study on Thai cultural aspects in English language textbooks, Nomnian (2013) claimed that a further step with regard to the production of local culture-based English language textbooks should be taken in order to enable Thai learners to talk about and explain their own culture in English. This view is supported by Kanoksilapatam (2015a), who observed that the use of target cultural content in commercial textbooks may hinder the full benefit of English instruction and that Thai learners, especially the younger ones, seem to benefit more from locally produced materials that can connect them to their own communities. Although the issue has been raised, few studies have been conducted. Among these, Kaewla and Bunyean (2015) constructed localised materials to develop the reading and writing skills of elementary school learners in an elephant based-community tourism area in Surin Province. The teaching materials,
consisting of ten topics related to local wisdom and their way of life, helped learners to improve their learning efficiency and attain a higher level of learner satisfaction.

Similarly, Kanoksilapatham (2015a, 2015b, 2016) developed different sets of instructional innovations for elementary English education based on local Thainess from a variety of different focus areas. While the first two initially focused only on Samut Sakhon Province, the last one concentrated specifically on the northeastern region of Thailand. After being implemented in elementary schools in the focus areas, these localised teaching materials were found to be very helpful in promoting English language learning and local Thainess knowledge. Along this line of research, this study aims to further highlight the positive impacts of instructional innovations developed based on northern regional Thainess. In addition to confirming that Thainess can be effectively integrated into English teaching, this study also complements previous studies by providing additional evidence of the extent to which the local regional Thainess-based instructional innovations can be a great way to create a classroom environment where learners have authentic activities and meaningful tasks that promote their speaking skills.

Method

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of northern Thainess-based instructional materials in terms of 1) instilling in young learners a better understanding of their own northern culture, and 2) providing them with an opportunity to practise speaking English in authentic contexts. The following procedures were conducted to accomplish the research objectives.

Defining Thainess and Identifying Lesson Topics

Generally, the term Thainess has been used to describe the way of life, the customs, or the traditions belonging to Thailand and its people. In this study, Thainess is defined based on Kanoksilapatham’s (2016) notion as “a cluster of prominent characteristics pertaining to one specific area of Thailand, be they geographical, historical, architectural, cultural, or environmental” (p. 128). However, as noted by Mishan and Timmis (2015), of all the different features of the local culture identified, tourist attractions seem to be appropriate for the lesson topics, mainly because of their concrete cultural reference points, covering multiple dimensions of art, history, geography, tradition, and architecture. In addition, such topics would provide an opportunity for young learners who may not have first-hand travelling experiences to be more knowledgeable about their own region. Accordingly, northern Thainess in this investigation refers to the prominent tourist attractions of the 17 provinces in the northern region of Thailand.

To identify the lesson topics for this study, a questionnaire with 32 items gleaned from an Internet search was constructed, representing well-known tourist attractions in the northern region. Questionnaire respondents who were community members from each of the 17 northern provinces (N = 1,870) were asked to choose at least eight items from the list that they thought people from the northern region of Thailand should be knowledgeable of. Based on the questionnaires completed (N=1,698), the top eight most popular tourist attractions were as follows: Phra That Doi Suthep Temple, Rong Khun Temple, Sukhothai Historical Park, Thai Elephant Conservation Centre, Bhumibol Dam, Phra Sri Rattana Mahathat Royal Temple, Borapet Lake and Khao Kho. These eight topics were subsequently verified by three elementary school teachers who were also community members, for their representativeness of northern tourist attractions.

Constructing Northern Thainess-Based Instructional Innovations

Based on the eight topics obtained, a set of instructional innovations with eight lessons was developed. The contents of each lesson were selected from diverse sources. The eight lessons were uniformly divided
into two parts: vocabulary and reading. Each lesson began with a set of ten vocabulary items, accompanied by a set of translation in Thai. This stage of construction ensured that the effectiveness of the instructional innovations was in alignment with earlier research findings investigating the vital role of vocabulary on learners’ reading comprehension (Farvardin & Koosha, 2011; Qian, 2002; Schmitt, 2000) and the advantages of learning new vocabulary via first language (L1) translation (Joyce, 2015; Lui, 2008; Yoshii, 2006).

Following the vocabulary section was the reading section of 6–7 sentences (50–65 words). The contents of this reading section were based on the 10 vocabulary items pertaining to each tourist attraction previously presented, covering a wide range of information, such as geographical details, historical accounts, and highlighted activities. To ensure that these lessons were practical and appropriate for young learners, all proper names were accompanied by their equivalent Thai in parentheses. Certain language constructions (e.g., passive, extraposed subject, or complex sentence structures) were intentionally avoided to accommodate the young learners’ limited English proficiency level. As stated in the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 for English, these young learners of Grade 4 are only expected to be able to use and understand a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to their immediate concrete surroundings. The language used in the eight lessons were checked by a native speaker of English for linguistic accuracy.

In addition, accompanying multimedia materials were constructed to scaffold the young learners in the learning process. As seen in Figure 1, a set of colourful slides with animations was produced to make each lesson more attractive. Out of eight lessons, this figure shows a set of slides constructed for Lesson 2. It is about Phra That Doi Suthep Temple, one of the most well-known tourist attractions in the north of Thailand. In addition to providing the general atmosphere, each picture included in the slides intends to provide visual information about the location and cultural contents of the place, for example, the golden pagoda, the Naga staircase and the scenic viewpoint. Additionally, video clips corresponding to the topics produced at actual visits to the sites were included to make the lessons more vivid and easier to understand. This incorporation of video clips was intended to accommodate the learning needs and characteristics of the so-called Generation Z learners, who are visually literate and prefer visual learning over other styles of learning (Berk, 2009). English audio recordings at a speed appropriate for young learners were also created by native American speakers and inserted into individual PowerPoint slides. These recordings not only serve as an effective means of compensating for the learners’ lack of exposure to native spoken English, but also connect these young learners with what they saw in the video clips.

**Constructing Assessment Instruments**

In order to monitor and assess the impacts of the set of the materials and instruction, a myriad of instruments was devised, including northern Thainess pre/post-tests, handouts as scaffolding for the tour guide simulation task, and a scoring rubric were developed to gauge learners’ northern Thainess knowledge and their ability to turn content and language input provided into a practical and authentic use of speaking.

To begin with, a pre/post-test of 40 items was constructed in Thai based on the contents of the eight lessons. Five pieces of information representing each tourist attraction were included. This test was subsequently validated for content validity using the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) technique by three elementary school teachers who were community members. When any question scored an IOC less than 0.5, the question was revised and re-evaluated. As shown, Table 1 presents a set of five northern Thainess test items originally in Thai but translated into English. The tests required the learners to fill in the blank with the correct information about Rong Khun Temple, a famous tourist attraction in the north. The total scores for this pre/post-test was 40 (1 point each).
In addition, the tour guide task was selected to provide the learners with an opportunity to practise speaking English in authentic contexts. Given that the focus of this study is on northern tourist attractions along with the fact that Thailand is a world-known tourist destination, this speaking task can be considered one of most relevant platforms to compensate for the learners’ limited opportunities to use and practise English in their everyday lives. The task aimed to motivate learners to integrate their northern
Thainess knowledge with their knowledge of English learned in class and to put such integrated knowledge to practical use. Handouts with six colourful pictures pertaining to each lesson were prepared to provide these learners with some visual clues. At this juncture, each learner assumed the role of a knowledgeable tour guide, describing the tourist attractions orally in English.

To accurately determine the effectiveness of the task, a scoring rubric was developed to assess the learners’ tour guide task performance. As seen in Table 2, a total of ten points were divided into three categories covering the major components of successful completion of the task, namely “content” (4 points), “vocabulary” (4 points), and “intelligibility” (2 points). In this scenario, content was very crucial because without the content knowledge, this tour guide task would not have been possible. In return, for the learners to be able to express their northern Thainess in English, vocabulary knowledge was indispensable. Likewise, intelligibility was assessed because without intelligibility, what was produced by the learners would not make sense no matter how much content was presented or how many words the learners know. For the content category, 1 point was awarded for every piece of information about a particular topic, with the maximum of 4 points. For vocabulary use, 1 point was awarded for every target word used in of each lesson, with the maximum of 4 points. Finally, 2 points were awarded when the language output could be understood with minimal or no difficulty; 1 point if there was some difficulty; and no point awarded if what produced was unintelligible. In light of the learners’ relatively young age and their lack of experience in performing an authentic task in English, the satisfactory level of their performance at this initial stage was set only at fifty percent for the total score.

### TABLE 2
**Rubric Scoring for the Simulation Tour Guide Task**

| Category       | Scoring criteria                                                                 | Score |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Content     | 0: No production of information related to the topic.                            |       |
| (4 pts)        | 1: One piece of information about the topic was mentioned.                       |       |
|                | 2: Two pieces of information about the topic were mentioned.                     |       |
|                | 3: Three pieces of information about the topic were mentioned.                   |       |
|                | 4: Four or more pieces of information about the topic were mentioned.           |       |
| 2. Vocabulary  | 0: No language output and no vocab produced.                                     |       |
| (4 pts)        | 1: Minimal language output with the mastery of 1 word                            |       |
|                | 2: Moderate amount of language with the mastery of 2 words                       |       |
|                | 3: Substantial amount of language output with the mastery of 3 words            |       |
|                | 4: Satisfactory language amount of language output with the mastery of 4        |       |
|                | words or more                                                                    |       |
| 3. Intelligibility | 0: Language output contains no intelligibility due to no production of         |       |
| (2 pts)        | language.                                                                        |       |
|                | 1: Language output can be understood with some difficulty.                       |       |
|                | 2: Language output can be understood with minimal or no difficulty               |       |

### Implementing the Instructional Innovations

The instructional innovations were implemented in a Grade 4 class of a public school located in the northern region of Thailand. The reason for selecting Grade 4 learners was twofold. First, as per the focus of this study, learners were expected to have some prior basic knowledge of English. Having been exposed to English instruction since Grade 1, students at Grade 4 would have a level of English knowledge that could be built on in this study. Second, the implementation of the lessons was considered an intervention. That is, the learners were pulled out two hours each week from their regular class schedule to take part in this research project. As a result, Grade 4 students were selected because they were still free from any preparations necessary for the National Examination required at Grade 5 and 6 levels.
For school selection criteria, the willingness of the school to cooperate and make necessary arrangements was firstly taken into consideration. Furthermore, it was important for the school to have facilities like computers and projectors so that the participants could fully benefit from the multimedia materials created to accompany the instructional innovations. Based on these criteria, one of the municipality schools in the Mueang District of Phitsanulok Province was selected as the research site. The school offered classes for students from kindergarten through Grade 9 with a total enrolment of 548 students. At the elementary level, there were 320 students enrolled in Grades 1-6. Each level consisted of two classes. To avoid bias and further complications, two classes of Grade 4 with a total of 52 students (28 males and 24 females) took part in this research. This group of students received an instructional intervention, in addition to their regular English classes.

The instructional intervention covered a total period of eleven consecutive weeks. The first week was set aside for providing learners with general information about this research project and administering a pre-test on northern Thainess. After spending some time getting acquainted, learners were given 20 minutes to complete a 40-item pre-test in order to estimate their knowledge of northern Thainess. The pre-test was subsequently marked and recorded; 1 point for correct answers and 0 for incorrect answers. No penalties were given for spelling mistakes. An overview of the northern region of Thailand was also presented in this first meeting, including key words related to the geographical information of the region (e.g., north, east, west, south, mountain, forest, district, and province).

The eight lessons were delivered in the following eight weeks. Each lesson lasted for a total of 120 minutes (or two class periods). In each class, the same procedures were conducted as follows. The handouts corresponding to the individual lessons were distributed at the beginning of the class to introduce the learners to the topics. Then the video clips were shown to allow them to see what the topic sites actually look like. With colourful slides projected onto the screen, learners were introduced to a set of vocabulary, followed by a reading. The pronunciation and the meaning of words on the vocabulary list were emphasised to ensure that learners were able to understand individual sentences with the focused words in the reading section. While teaching, a number of references to what learners had previously seen in the video clips were also mentioned to help them better understand the lessons. Subsequently, various language games and relevant activities were conducted individually and collectively in a small group to reinforce what had been taught. By the end of each lesson, learners were often asked to describe what they had seen in each slide in English without being allowed to look at their hand-outs.

Assessing the Instructional Innovations and Instruction

To assess the effectiveness of the instructional innovations, a post-test on northern Thainess and a tour guide simulation task were administered. Both tasks were split into two halves in order to maintain the cognitive load at a level appropriate for Grade 4 learners. For the post-test on northern Thainess, the first half (20 items) was administered in week 6 after the completion of Lesson 4 and the second half (20 items) in week 11 after Lesson 8. Each post-test was completed in approximately 10 minutes. Based on the same criteria for marking the pre-test, the post-test was also marked and recorded. The scores from the two halves were then combined to yield a comprehensive picture of learners’ performance on the post-test. To identify learners’ possible knowledge gains, their scores obtained from the pre-test and post-test on northern Thainess were analysed using descriptive statistics. Subsequently, a paired t-test was carried out to determine significant differences in gain scores over time.

Similarly, the tour guide task was conducted twice, right after the completion of the post-tests on northern Thainess. With multiple raters involved in scoring the task, the procedures to establish inter-rater reliability started in week 3 (at the end of Lesson 2: Phra That Doi Suthep Temple). 8 students were asked to voluntarily come in front of the class and assume the role of a young tour guide, describing pictures of Phra That Doi Suthep Temple seen on the slides in English. At this juncture, each of the students’ performance was video recorded. In that same week, the four raters who were English instructors attended a training session conducted by researchers to ensure that the learners’ tour guide performance was
consistently assessed based on the same scoring criteria. During this session, each of the four raters was asked to independently watch the eight video recordings of the tour guide task on Phra That Doi Suthep Temple and score the learners according to the rubric constructed. Overall, across raters, percentage agreement was 96, indicating a high level of inter-rater reliability (Graham et al., 2012). It was then agreed that each rater was consistent at a certain level in scoring individual learners’ tour guide task performance.

The actual tour guide task then took place in weeks 6 and 11. To begin the task, the class was initially divided into four groups based on the number of lessons included at each time of assessment. Each group was assigned with one specific topic and instructed to individually perform the role as a young tour guide as demonstrated in week 3. With the provision of the pictures in front of them, they were to describe what was seen in English. They were told to spend as much time as needed preparing and then performing the task only when they thought they were ready. In addition, they were allowed to describe any pictures seen in the handouts in any order.

To assist young learners, four university students majoring in English were assigned as facilitators for each specific topic. These volunteers were available to help learners who had any difficulty with certain words or sentences and to encourage those who were more hesitant. Once they completed their first topic, learners were free to proceed with any new topic they wanted. Although no time limit was fixed for individual topics, learners were still reminded to complete the four topics by the end of the class period. Subsequently, the scores from the performed tour guide task were scrutinised.

Findings

As mentioned earlier, the total number of learners enrolled at Grade 4 at this municipality school was 52. However, not all of them attended classes or completed all of the activities during the eleven-week period. The final pool of participants in this study includes only those learners who at least participated in the pre/post-tests of northern Thainess and the tour guide simulation task. Ultimately, only 49 learners were counted as the final pool participants of this study.

Northern Thainess Knowledge

As previously described, the 40-item pre-test was administered in week 1 to determine their knowledge of northern Thainess. The same test was split into halves for post-test. The first half of the post-test was administered in week 6 after the completion of Lesson 4 and the second half in week 11 after Lesson 8. Accordingly, the scores of both pre- and post-tests are shown in Table 3 and Table 4 in two halves (20 points each). The scores of the entire test are referred to as the combined scores (40 points).

| TABLE 3                  |
|-------------------------|
| **Pre-test Scores on Northern Thainess** | **First half (20 points)** | **Second half (20 points)** | **Combined Pre-test (40 points)** |
| Minimum                 | 0                          | 1                          | 1                          |
| Maximum                 | 9                          | 9                          | 15                         |
| Average                 | 4.96                      | 3.04                      | 8.00                        |

In Table 3, the results revealed that out of a total of 40 points, the pre-test score of the class was 1 and the maximum was 15, resulting in an average score of 8.00. These findings clearly demonstrated that the learners brought with them little knowledge of their own local culture prior to the instruction.
In Table 4, the findings from the two post-tests administered after Lessons 4 and 8 demonstrated that the minimum score of the class was 5 and the maximum was 37, with an average score of 22.88. As seen in Tables 1 and 2, the learners performed much better in the post-test (22.88) on northern Thainess.

A paired t-test performed on the average gain scores between pre- and post-tests further indicated a significant increase in mean scores at p. < 0.05 (t = -15.17, p = 0.000). This finding highlighted the positive impact and success of the northern Thainess-based instructional innovations in providing young learners with a better understanding of their own local culture.

Tour Guide Simulation Task

To provide them an opportunity to practise speaking English in authentic contexts, the individual learners were required to participate in a tour guide simulation task—one after the completion of Lessons 4 and the other after Lesson 8. As mentioned earlier, each task was evaluated by four different raters, who were in charge of scoring the learners’ performance in one specific topic. As reported below, Table 5 shows the learners’ scores for each lesson and Table 5 shows their scores for each rubric category.

| Table 5 | Learners’ Tour Guide Scores |
|---------|-----------------------------|
|         | Lesson 1 (10 points) | Lesson 2 (10 points) | Lesson 3 (10 points) | Lesson 4 (10 points) | Lesson 5 (10 points) | Lesson 6 (10 points) | Lesson 7 (10 points) | Lesson 8 (10 points) | Total (80 points) |
| Minimum | 3                         | 3                       | 3                         | 4                         | 3                 | 3                         | 3                         | 4                         | 32          |
| Maximum | 10                        | 10                       | 10                        | 10                        | 10                | 10                        | 10                        | 10                        | 80          |
| Average | 6.20                      | 5.86                     | 5.16                      | 6.55                      | 4.69              | 5.24                      | 6.08                      | 6.31                      | 46.10       |

In Table 5 the maximum scores for each of the eight lessons were 10, and the minimum were 3 and 4. With a total of 80 points, the maximum score across the entire class was 80 and the minimum was 32. The findings suggest that learners were distributed across different proficiency levels. Some learners could perform very well, while the others were slightly more hesitant and therefore needed encouragement before the task could be executed.

In order to provide further details about the learners’ performance, the average scores of the eight lessons also need to be taken into account. The average scores for individual lessons were 6.20, 5.86, 5.16, 6.55, 4.69, 5.24, 6.08, and 6.31. Although the minimum scores of some individual lessons were less positive, there was only one lesson (Lessons 5: Thai Elephant Conservation Centre) in which the learners’ average scores were slightly lower than fifty percent of the total 10 points. These seemingly inconsistent scores among the eight lessons might have been mainly caused by the fact that some particular lessons dealt with tourist attractions that were more well-known or closer to the learners’ lives than the others. For example, the learners performed more satisfactorily in lessons on a temple located in their own province (Lesson 4: Phra Sri Rattana Mahathat Royal Temple). However, of the eight lessons, the total average score of the class was 46.10 out of 80 points. This total average score implies that the majority of learners were somewhat able to satisfactorily complete the task by getting at least half of the total points.

In addition, an examination of the scores pertaining to each rubric category is illuminating, showing how the learners performed the tour guide task. The learners’ rubric category scores as shown in Table 6 also lend strong support to the same proposition.

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Once again, there was a wide gap between the minimum and maximum scores in each of the three rubric categories due to the variability in learners’ proficiency levels. Some learners could attain the maximum requirements by receiving full scores in every category while the others could not. However, the average scores for each rubric category indicate that the extent to which the learners could perform the task was satisfactory. Out of a total of 32 points for content and vocabulary (4 points for each lesson and 8 lessons in all), the average scores were 16.02 and 19.86, respectively. These mean values demonstrate that most learners succeeded in using a sufficient amount of information to conduct the task. In terms of intelligibility, the average score was 10.22 out of 16, indicating that nearly all of the learners were at least able to make themselves understood. These findings signify the overall effectiveness of the instruction in motivating the students to use English by bringing the content and subject matter to life for them. Instead of focusing merely on rote learning and passive test-taking, these northern Thainess-based English lessons effectively equip learners with the content and language input, encouraging them to integrate the two types of knowledge into practical use in authentic contexts and enabling them to make important connections between the classroom and the world outside it.

**Discussion**

This current study bears a number of crucial pedagogical implications. Firstly, the key findings help confirm that the incorporation of local culture into ELT is potentially beneficial. Based on the context of this study, young Thai learners had very limited knowledge about their own region to begin with. Subsequently, the use of localised materials helped activate their relevant background knowledge, connecting their personal experiences to vicarious experiences. As shown, through the innovations, the learners proved to be more knowledgeable of their own regional identity. This newly activated schema in turn became a resource on which the learners could develop their English speaking skills, enabling them to successfully execute the tour guide task that might be considered intimidating for many learners. This highlighted role of local culture in language learning is congruent with Kramsch and Sillivan (1996), who noted that the process of acquiring culture and language can be successful only if learners can use English to effectively communicate in a way that reflects their own local culture and beliefs.

However, it should be cautioned that the incorporation of local culture into English teaching materials should be carefully prepared and well-planned. For example, if possible, the local community should be asked to be involved in identifying lesson topics. This will result in the lessons that are truly representatives of the local culture, reflecting the actual needs of the local community. Additionally, the accompanying multimedia materials like video clips and slides should be considered, providing a scaffolding for content and language input for learners. The positive impact of using multimedia is stressed by Yang and Fang (2008) as a practical way to get the learners involved in language learning by promoting their motivation and providing them with the opportunities to make connections between verbal and visual representations of the content. As seen in this study, the availability of multimedia materials provided the learners with a virtual transition to the places used as lesson topics, enabling them to build a better understanding of northern Thainess. Without taking into consideration these necessary components, it might be difficult for any localised materials to engage learners in authentic and meaningful learning experiences.

Secondly, the pattern of learners’ scores in their tour guide task implicates the importance of
vocabulary knowledge. Although the learners could satisfactorily perform the task, their average vocabulary scores (19.86 out of 32) were slightly higher than for the content scores (16.02 out of 32). Two different but related determinants may be responsible for these findings. One is that there was always the unequal proportion between the amount of vocabulary and content required for describing the pictures. For example, learners would get only one point for the content but as much as two points for the vocabulary if they successfully described the picture of a pagoda at Phra That Doi Suthep Temple using the sentence *This temple has a beautiful pagoda* (target words underlined). Another possible explanation is that, as no particular order of the pictures was required, the learners tended to describe the pictures with many target vocabulary items. Since the learners were already familiar with the regional contexts in the first place, the amount of vocabulary known can then be assumed to have had directly affected the extent to which they could successfully integrate the two types of knowledge and execute the required task. This premise has been bolstered by scholars (e.g., Folse, 2004; Nation, 1994), who have noted that the more vocabulary words the learners know, the better they will become at expressing what they want to when speaking.

To facilitate learners’ vocabulary learning, the need for explicit instruction such as vocabulary pre-teaching to prepare learners for other subsequent instructional activities is highlighted. According to Ruddell (2002), words in vocabulary pre-teaching should be strategically selected by considering whether they are (a) central to the meaning of the lesson, (b) potential barriers for comprehension of the main ideas of the lesson, or (c) potentially problematic for learners who lack background knowledge of the subject being studied. In this research, a set of key content-specific vocabulary items was immediately introduced and contextualised after the learners watched the video clip. As shown, this pre-teaching vocabulary effectively provided the appropriate scaffolding for instruction—a process that is essential to promote learner engagement in a Thai ELF classroom (Scheb-Buenner, 2013). The learners at this point could understand the meaning of the reading section without the teacher’s translation. A greater amount of time could then be devoted for practicing pronunciation to ensure that learners became more confident in saying the sentences out loud. Again, it is worth mentioning here that localised materials with vocabulary related to the learners’ background tend to benefit them most at this stage. When they were required to perform the tour guide task at the end of the instruction, the chances for failure was therefore minimised because the learners were already well equipped with sufficient vocabulary knowledge.

Thirdly, in order to maximise the benefit of language instruction, only language tasks that potentially allow for authentic communication should be selected. Previous studies (e.g., Punthumasen, 2007; Choomthong, 2014) have shown that one of the greatest factors that hinders Thai learners’ communicative skills in English is the overemphasis on the grammar-translation and rote learning methods of teaching rather than on the communicative approach. As part of an overall solution, this current study attempted to underpin the principal role of language as a means of communication through the implementation of the tour guide task. That is, with the input from the instruction, the learners were requested to demonstrate how well they were able to put their integrated knowledge of Thainess and English into practical use instead of merely memorising the content and taking a series of multiple-choice tests. Therefore, the tour guide task became an avenue for learners to practise speaking English, partially compensating for their lack of opportunities to use it in authentic situations in daily life. However, when learners’ performance is assessed based on the lesson content as seen in this study, it is highly recommended that more attention should be paid to encouraging learners not to memorize what they will say to complete a task. Alternatively, as demonstrated in this study, learners should be told that they are free to construct their own sentences as long as they can make themselves understood.

In addition to providing more chances to speak English, the tour guide task helped the learners see how English can be used in a context relevant to them. As shown, the learners were led to realise the role of English as an important means of exchanging and sharing information of any kind. Instead of relying solely on the content of commercial textbooks, it was obvious that the learners could effectively develop their language communication skills using their knowledge of northern Thainess. Specifically, this practice enables learners to partially claim an ownership of English, as they can now use it to
communicate in their own context. As long as this value and authentic need to study English is made clear to the learners, their ultimate goal of English language learning should gradually change from simply focusing on passing examinations to improving their language skills for real life situations. With all these benefits, it is therefore imperative that language tasks are well-designed and correctly executed in a way that elicits a realistic opportunity for the learners to use their knowledge in a meaningful way.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study illustrates the positive impact of northern Thainess-based English lessons with two main perspectives. Firstly, through the implementation of the instructional innovations, learners become more knowledgeable of their own regional identity, contributing to their pride and sense of belonging to their own local community. Secondly, as the content of instruction is related to learners’ own context and community, they can make full use of their activated background knowledge to develop their English speaking skills. As demonstrated, learners eventually realise the practical and authentic use of English, as they can use it to convey the knowledge of their local community. More concisely, learners’ local culture should not be seen as something to be overcome or cast aside, but rather as a resource that contributes to the effective teaching and learning of English. To broaden the horizon of traditional EFL classroom teaching, it is therefore strongly recommended that culturally relevant materials should be incorporated to help improve learners’ language acquisition, learning motivation, and identity formation.

In further relevant studies, researchers seeking to examine the role of local culture in the Thai EFL context are suggested to develop instructional materials that reflect more diverse aspects of local Thainess pertaining to their specific geographical areas. This local Thainess can represent an area like a province, a district, or a specific community determined by learners’ respective communities. In terms of assessing the impact of the instruction, in addition to speaking, it is recommended that other skill areas (i.e., listening, reading, and writing) or even integrated skills should be systematically assessed. If focusing only on speaking activities as shown in the current study, learners’ expected outcomes might be raised to a certain degree. For example, the class average scores should not be lower than seventy percent of the total points available. For older learners, it might be beneficial to situate local Thainess in a wider context of cultural diversity (e.g., national cultures, international cultures, or ASEAN cultures) in order to fully develop their intercultural competence.

**Acknowledgment**

This research project was financially supported by the Thailand Research Fund (Grant No. RTA 5880007). The successful completion of this study would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of numerous people and agencies in the northern region of Thailand, including, educational administrators, school teachers, and community members. Last but not least, sincere thanks and appreciation goes to Grade 4 learners who were enthusiastic, excited and willing to engage in the learning activities throughout this entire project.

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