Developing Competences of English Teachers in Secondary STEM Education Schools Track in Thailand

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Abstract. The purposes of this study are to investigate the competences of English teachers in Thailand and propose the teaching competence enhancement approach to meet the needs of 21st century English teachers for STEM track school. The documentary study was used as methodology in this study. The findings of this study demonstrated that the activity-based teaching allows students to practice communication skills effectively. Furthermore, English teacher’s competences to develop students’ English learning can be implemented by using five-step communicative teaching approach, including warm up, presentation, practice, production, and wrap up.

1. Introduction
Due to the rapid change of today’s globalization, English has become increasingly essential for communication. English is one of the most core subjects that students must acquire for greater social understanding. The language is also massively used in technology-based scheme, particularly in the direction that country is moving towards ASEAN Economic Community [17]. Therefore, incompetence of language is a huge barrier of country’s development, especially in terms of human resources development. A key success to students’ English competence development is to equip them with the meaningful knowledge of native speaker’ language and culture, so that they are able to use English to communicate fluently, accurately and confidently. Thus, students should be provided with opportunities to practise their language skills in and out of the classroom [2, 8].

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education has recently placed emphasis on the English teaching and learning management to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Accordingly, the students are highly anticipated to gain experience and develop English competence in line with the social context [1]. Hence, communicative language teaching (CLT) has increased the importance in educational institutes. In addition, students are encouraged to become active learner, instead of being passive learner in the traditional English teaching approach. Students should be provided with opportunities to demonstrate their English skills with confidence and apply them in students’ everyday lives [6, 21].
However, the traditional English teaching approach secondary schools remains in Thailand. Teacher-centered approach in most English classes focusing on reading and writing; as a result, students mainly learn from the textbooks with passive classroom learning environment. The interactive English teaching and learning for communication are limitedly implemented in classroom. Furthermore, it is clearly seen that exam-oriented education in Thailand aims to boost students’ college readiness, instead of teaching to enhance students’ skill and experience. The report showed that 90 percent of Thai students learn to memorize vocabularies, sentences structures by heart, regardless communication skills, resulting in the students’ poor communicative English learning outcomes [3].

Due to the growing needs of 21st century knowledge and skills in terms of communication and technology literacy, the Ministry of Education has highlighted the importance of English teaching and learning as a key subject to access other knowledge to pace up with the global competitiveness. Recently, the leading schools in Thailand have conducted a European educational framework, called the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) the English teaching and learning. The framework is designed to improve the students’ English ability to reach the level of B1, or Independent User, meaning that the students are able to communicate, write, and comprehend the general contexts. The framework also guides English teachers to implement their teaching in accordance with the framework’s objectives.

On the other hand, English teaching and learning in the secondary and undergraduate level fails to meet as learners cannot communicate effectively. One of the unsuccessful factors that is highly claimed is the poor English teaching approach. In the previous study [4], it was noted that the four widely seen hindrances in English teaching were that English teachers have limited understanding of the alternative teaching method that focuses on practicing English for communication, rather than memorizing sentences structures. Teachers are lack of confidence to teach English speaking and listening skills since they are unfamiliar with the new teaching approach. As a consequence, teachers mainly conduct the traditional teaching approach that learning refers to memorizing repeatedly. This causes the students’ lack of opportunities to develop the communicative skills.

The second failure in English teaching and learning is that teachers are concerned about time limitation. Teachers perceive that learning activities require much time that they may not be able to complete teaching session which is massively based on textbooks. The third hindrance in English teaching and learning is that incompetence of teachers to design the creative and innovative teaching materials that would inspire learners’ motivation. Another obstacle that causing the ineffective English teaching and learning is that teachers have misunderstanding of the evaluation and assessment of the students’ learning outcomes.

The results of the study are consistent with the report of Department of Academic Affairs [14] stating that challenges in English teaching and learning in Thailand have long rooted in teachers’ teaching quality. The report concluded that teachers are incompetent to teach English for communication purposes from the evidence that they mainly teach reading, writing, and word-by-word translation.

The issues have existed in schools for decades and never been adequately resolved although the continuous teachers’ professional development in line with the country’s educational development has been implemented over time. The author, as an English teacher with 20 year teaching experiences, believe that it is important to take these issues into action seriously. The problems found in English teachers’ training-based professional development are summarized as follows: 1) inadequacy of training, 2) inability to meet teachers’
requirements, 3) theory-based training, and 4) lack of follow-up evaluation and practical implications as further development guidance for teachers.

Moreover, it is indicated that the teachers in Thailand should have bilingual competences; Thai as the first mother-tongue language and another as the second language [18]. Particularly, 21st century teachers must have good command in English. The training programs offered for professional development should be on-the-job-training based on practice.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the competences of English teachers in Thailand and propose guidance for further English teachers’ competences development.

2. The theoretical frameworks of English teachers’ teaching competences

Previous studies investigated the teachers’ competence and suggested several development methods as presented below.

Teacher competence is an observable behavior. Proficient teachers must be able to transfer knowledge and urge students to demonstrate what they have learned in class. In other words, competent teachers must lead students to reflect learning behavior in consistency with the teachers’ teaching objectives [11].

The competence of teacher refers to “the ability to address the problems.” What extent teachers are able to solve problems in particular is considered as competence. Thus, teachers with high competence are those who are successful to eliminate problems in various areas [7].

The competency based education emphasizes on the following five key qualities of teachers that have an influence on students’ learning outcomes [24].

1. Teachers have strong competency, knowledge, skills, and attitudes
2. Teachers utilize the potentials wisely.
3. Teachers assess and evaluate students accurately.
4. Students must be motivated to be greater and progressive, and
5. Teacher must improve the content continuously.

From the related studies, it can be concluded that teachers’ competencies refers to the ability or behavior of the teacher that reflects the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and attributes which lead teachers to perform teaching effectively. The teachers’ strong competencies have a positive learning outcomes of students in the way that they can sustain their physical, mental, emotional and social well-being development. As a consequence, students can apply taught knowledge to their daily lives.

The teachers’ competencies development can be implemented by using guidelines for activities-based teaching and learning as presented below.

2.1. Guidelines for activities-based teaching and learning

1. Develop curriculum at classroom level by designing teaching structure in sequential order, starting from easy-to-difficult content, or from the natural understanding to theories.
2. Transfer knowledge and contents that must be applied in students’ everyday lives.
3. Provide students with exciting learning activities to learn and to meet students’ needs.
4. Design teaching and learning activities that promote critical-thinking and problem-solving processes.
5. Direct students to do good deeds and sustain life-long learning by building active classroom environment, using psychological tests.
6. Evaluate the student's overall development, rather than the result of academic tests.
7. Develop curriculum at local level by designing compulsory and elective curriculum to allow students to select the subjects that interest them.
According to the guidelines for teaching and learning activities, certain techniques are suggested to be used for activity-based teaching effectiveness as further explained.

2.2. The activity-based teaching techniques
Teaching technique refers to the specific methods chosen by the instructor to be implemented in the classroom activities. The teaching technique must be developed in accordance with the content, the objectives of learning, and the ability of learners.

1. The teaching technique used in the group activities should be designed for more than two students so that they interact with each other. The common activities to motivate activities include games, role-play conversation, simulation, short play, case study, group discussion, brainstorming, field trip, etc.

2. Teaching techniques should be consistent with the collaborative learning that creates active classroom learning environment. Students collaboratively brainstorm in small groups by sharing ideas through activities e.g. storytelling, group discussion, etc.

3. Teaching technique must emphasize students’ creativity and drive students to seek more information. Certain activities can arouse students’ critical thinking process including metaphors, interpretations, criticism, etc.

Teaching English at the elementary level should be in accordance with the learners’ nature of understanding. That is, elementary school students in grade 1-6, aged between 6-12 years should be provided with direct experience by using self-learning activities since the common personality of young-aged children is curiosity to learn surrounding environment. The activities and lesson should be structured in an easy-to-difficult order. Moreover, the activities should offer opportunities to learners to express themselves; for example, games, video presentation, using visual aids e.g. cartoons along with teaching. The technique is to divide students, mingling between female and male students, with high, moderate, and low GPA, into small groups or learning center groups. The teacher act as facilitator encouraging students to participate in group activities or learning centers.

Activities-based teaching and learning methods and techniques should focus on providing learners opportunities to develop communicative skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing so that they can practice and eventually communicate in English effectively. Therefore, it is important to understand the techniques and methods selected in teaching and learning to prompt students with communicative skills in a particular context.

2.3. Competencies in teaching and learning management
Teaching activities is the most important element of teaching in this approach. Thus, the instructional activities means ‘all activities performed in class must be time effective and bring about students’ learning process” with the collaboration between the instructor and learners. The students’ experience of self-learning from activities can be developed to become a life-long learning behavior [20, 23].

It is suggested that teaching activities are key element of teaching when they are aligned with the content of the lesson effectively, the students can learn from both theories and practice [5]. Teaching activities should meet the following requirements.

1. Teaching activities are consistent with the purposes of curriculum that is to develop learners’ problem-solving and analytical thinking skills.

2. Teaching activities are consistent with the teaching objectives that focus on enhancing certain learning behaviors in particular.

3. Teacher must organize activities in accordance with learners’ age and their ability to learn.

4. Teacher must design activities in accordance with the nature of the subject; for example, types of facts, types of thinking, and level of creativity.

5. Teacher must manage activities in sequence to allow the students to develop their learning so that they are not confused and seek the linkage to the content of the study.

6. Teacher must create interesting activities by using the appropriate teaching materials.
7. Teacher must provide students with opportunity to do activities in order to achieve self-directed learning. Teacher acts a facilitator, encouraging students to acquire knowledge by themselves.

8. Teacher must ensure that activities used in class positively challenge students’ ways of thinking development so that they learn to seek more information and to solve problems.

9. Teacher must perform variety of activities to suit the current situations, so that they are more related to students’ every lives and increase their attention.

10. Teacher must control the class with positive characteristics (e.g. fun and friendly), making the students feel comfortable. Teacher’s emotions while teaching also have an influence on students’ attitude towards the subject. Therefore, the effectiveness of the classroom learning environment depends on the personality of the instructor.

11. The activities must be assessed to determine the strengths and weakness for future improvement. The assessment should be during and post-activities implementation by using observations, questionnaire, examinations, or tests.

From the suggestions in the previous studies, it can be concluded that teaching activities refer to teaching element that direct students to develop learning accurately and effectively. Moreover, the teaching activities must meet the objectives of curriculum and suit for the age of students to develop learning appropriately.

This statement is consistent with the study of Millman [12] in ways that teaching behavior in the classroom plays a vital role. When the teacher pays attention to the students’ learning and controls his or her teaching behavior accordingly, learning goals are likely to be achieved. Despite various factors have an influence on students’ learning outcomes, teacher’s teaching attitude and behavior remain important in teaching.

However, apart from the content of subject, teachers are expected to have other basic knowledge. To combine the holistic knowledge, English teachers need to have strong understanding of English linguistics and teaching English [15]. The following four topics are critical for teaching English.

1. Nature of language
2. Psychology of Learning
3. Uniqueness of English
4. Teaching foreign language

Hence, whether the English teacher is a native speaker or not, it is important to recognize the difference between formal English (e.g. used in the group discussion and presentation) and informal English (e.g. used in conversations for everyday lives at work, home, schools, shops, and among friends). The listening and speaking skills must be highlighted as means of communication.

From the scholars’ theoretical work, it can be summarized that the qualities of competent English teacher are the abilities to lead students to accomplish the learning goals by acting as facilitator.

3. Concepts of English teachers’ competencies development in teaching and learning for communication

English is key command required in all today’s careers because it is a universal language used to communicate among people worldwide. In terms of education, it is such a communicative tool that makes it possible to reach out wider knowledge that is available endlessly throughout the world. Due to the benefits and importance of English, Thailand’s government has placed an increasing effort in English teaching and learning methods focusing on communication purposes. The objectives of English teaching and learning using communicative approach are to prompt learners to utilize English knowledge and skills for the effective communication in their future career [22].

According to previous studies, the widely seen competencies required for English teachers addressing on communication are listed as below.
3.1. Teaching English as a second language

The purpose of today’s teaching focuses on the development of communicative competence that means the appropriateness and acceptance of language use in the social situations. Teaching English for communication is a teaching approach that includes theories of communication, structure of language, situations, and human psychology. In addition, Finocchiaro [9] proposes the following guidelines for teaching and learning communication.

1. Teacher must plan to provide students with experience carefully.
2. Teacher must design the simulation of situations and teaching materials to help students understand the meaning and present them clearly to students.
3. Each lesson should include language training with communicative activities to allow students to practise.
4. The existing language of students should be monitored. Teacher should suggest higher level of language use. However, when teachers explain important information, the easy-to-understand language should be used.
5. Teacher must motivate students to practice together as a group, or even as an individual.
6. Teacher must have the expertise in teaching that allows students to practice in pairs.
7. Teacher must ensure that time is adequately offered to students to practice communicative conversations as well as articles. This helps students understand the content of the lesson and develop their communication skills.
8. Teacher must be flexible to prepare the manuscript for audio recording and communicative activities that can be practiced in the classroom appropriately.
9. Teacher must analyze how the students develop their reading and writing an early stage.
10. Teacher must lesson plans to develop students’ reading to help them increase both knowledge and experience.
11. Teacher must design learning activities that increase the creativity and ability to write freely.
12. Teacher must encourage students to understand the culture of native speakers from the teachers’ designed activities e.g. formal versus informal dialogues.
13. Teacher must shape students to be proud of their country and themselves despite the differences of native speakers’ culture.
14. Teacher must select audio and visual aids to help students develop their language learning and understand native speakers’ culture effectively.
15. Teacher must conduct student’s learning outcomes assessment and evaluation to ensure that the student's learning achievement as well as teachers’ teaching effectiveness are satisfactory.

From the concepts of English teaching and learning for communication. It can be concluded that teaching should emphasize the opportunities of students to practice the use of language in order to develop communication skills. The teachers act as facilitator organizing the activities for students to experience both simulation of situations (e.g. role-play conversation) and actual situations outside classroom. The objective of teaching English for communication is to allow the students to apply knowledge in their everyday lives effectively. Teaching should not focus massively on structure, or widely called ‘grammar’. Thus, the communicative teaching approach based on activities can enhance the ability of students to use language to communicate properly with greater confidence.

3.2. Teaching procedures

In the communicative teaching approach, 5-step teaching procedure is recommended [19].

1. Warm up: The first step is to provide activities to prompt students prior learning any new content. It can be a review of the previous lessons, or the importance of the new content. The suggested activities used in this stage can be music, games, tales, dialogues or performances.
2. Presentation: The second step is a language input to the students. The teachers’ language must be used commonly in everyday life and in the classroom. Teachers present information while the students observe teachers’ speaking. This step is to develop students’ listening skills.
3. Practice: This step focuses on students’ practice of language. This step is to demonstrate how students should perform in the actual situations. Teachers play a role as a conductor, allowing students to practice and participate in the learning activities.

4. Production: This step is to allow students to apply taught knowledge of language for communication like actual situations in their every lives. The new situations can be similar to the situations that the teachers have presented. The production step also encourages learners to utilize the language they have learned in the previous lessons. The teachers plays a role as an advisor to guide and assist learners in applying the language. Students are responsible for production of language use.

5. Wrap up: The final step is an activity to provide students with a summary of the lessons that can be music, games, exercises, or assignments.

In order to achieve in teaching and learning activities management, the teachers must understand and realize the teachers’ role and students’ role in each step. The teaching procedures help teachers design teaching activities more effectively [16].

4. Evaluation of the communicative teaching approach

According to the Ministry of Education [13], the assessment of teaching foreign language for general use can be conducted by using the questionnaire to measure and evaluate students’ ability. The language proficiency test can be divided into two types as follows.

1. Discrete Point Tests: are used to measure students’ specific knowledge, including phonetics, spelling, grammatical structure, and vocabulary.

2. Integrative Skills Tests: are used to measure students’ overall skills, including the fluency in general language [10]. Students’ communication skills tests are generally measured by each skill at a time; listening, speaking, reading and writing. By conducting the test, teachers should consider the following items:

   - The ability to communicate, unlike typical language knowledge should be tested from listening and speaking competence.
   - There should be a clue (e.g. keyword) in the text that students have experienced in lessons.
   - Sentences or passage should be included in the reading tests, so that students can gain knowledge from reading.

5. Conclusion

The today’s concept of teaching English to Thai students should focus on promoting learning by using the communicative teaching approach. The ultimate goal of teaching English is to develop learners to apply the language in everyday lives for communication effectively. It is necessary to modify the traditional teaching methods that massively address the understanding of grammatical principles and vocabularies by memorizing. English teachers should provide instructions of language use for communication based on learning activities that encourage learners to practise the communicative language.

The communicative activities must meet the interests of the students in line with the recommendation of student-centered teaching method. Teachers’ task-based instruction helps learners improve their English skills, critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and collaboration skills. Also, the activity-based teaching encourages students’ creativity, innovation and actively seeking more information; as a result, learners can build new knowledge upon the existing knowledge. In addition, the suggested productive learning is in line with the social needs that students should be prepared for future career in the 21st century.

From the previous studies, two main problems in competencies development of English teachers are that (1) teachers remain mainly implement traditional teaching method, and (2) teachers are lack of spirituality as teachers. Moreover, in the 21st century, teachers must have seven competencies: 1) student-centered teaching competencies, 2) assessment and evaluation of ability development with strong understanding of background knowledge differences among individuals, 3) computer and
technology competencies, 4) competence in pursuing ethics and code of conducts, 5) teamwork and sharing skills, 6) cross-cultural competencies, and 7) competency in facilitating and guiding students.

Recommendations from this study will be beneficial to the school management and education-related agencies for teachers’ competencies development planning to meet the needs in the 21st century.

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