

Needs and Expectations for an ELT Master's Program in Thailand: Voices from Pre- and In-Service Teachers

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Abstract

With the national and international policies on the qualifications required for Thai teachers of English to possess, a graduate degree program in English Language Teaching (ELT) could foster the mission and vision to develop the teaching and learning English at a school setting and the nation at large. Consequently, understanding the current trends and the factors that influence prospective students' decision in choosing a program of study is an important aspect in the curriculum development of a graduate degree program in ELT. This study examined the key elements influencing the decision of students to study in the ELT master's program at Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand so that the university and the program committee would be able to use them in planning and developing the curriculum. Nine participants of this study were education administrators, experienced teachers, RU pre-service English teachers, and RU master graduates. An online questionnaire and interviews were used and implemented in the study. The results of the study show that the lecturers' qualifications, tuition and fees, and weekend class schedules were the key factors for the prospective students to make a decision on the selection of a master's degree program. In addition, the results show the needs and aspects that the participants have on the program as well as the ELT and other courses related to English language teaching that are in high demand. Some suggestions and implications for future research were also addressed.

Keywords: needs analysis, ELT, English teaching and learning, master's program, curriculum development, medium of instruction, pre-and in-service teachers

Introduction

In the new era of globalization, the international importance of English is undeniable. The increase of global interactions is driving the demand for strengthening English education, leading to a call for several changes in English language teaching (ELT). Thus, to keep up with international standards and global demands, redesigning the curriculum and instruction is inevitable. One of the keys to the revolution of the curriculum and instruction in reimagining ELT programs is voices from pre- and in-service teachers expressing their needs and expectations of their improvement of English abilities and career growth opportunities.

Researchers in the field of ELT have shown some significant findings on voices, needs, and expectations. For example, Bordia, Wales, Pittam and Gallois (2006) assert that similarly to the case of customer satisfaction, prospective master's degree students in ELT, pre-service and current English teachers deserve professional education with high quality that responds to their needs for English language teaching and learning purposes. Their responses reflect professionalism, hand-on experience, and current issues in ELT in a particular region.

Despite the fact that like many other languages, English holds the status of a mere foreign language in Thailand, it is taught as one of mandatory subjects in primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. By joining the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Thailand was urged to take another step into English education reforms, which aim to prepare learners for international recruiters. In recent years, much effort has been

devoted to raising Thai EFL learners' English proficiency (Fry, 2013), and thus a variety of teaching approaches was introduced and put into practice in an effort to enhance English language teaching and learning.

While proper attention was given to learners and how to help them achieve communicative goals, the development of English curricula did not receive sufficient attention, leaving existing English curricula behind the reforms. The Ministry of Education then precedes further reforms targeting not only the area of language teaching and learning, but also curriculum development, especially at the university level (Kaur et al., 2016). In line with the curriculum reforms, universities across the country jumped on the bandwagon launching master's programs in English and other related fields of study such as English as an International Language (EIL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), or Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to advance English learning and accelerate career development.

In response to the paucity of literature on curriculum development, this study examined pre- and in-service Thai English teachers' needs and expectations for an ELT master's program. We also studied further into the impacts of the ELT master's program through the visions of education administrators, experienced teachers, current pre-service teachers and ELT master graduates. The findings of this study will yield significant contributions to the development of an ELT master's program and the framework for future research on curriculum development. This study was navigated through the following questions:

- 1) What aspects of an ELT master's program do pre- and in-service teachers perceive as contributions to their career development?
- 2) What are pre- and in-service teachers' attitudes towards English as a medium of

instruction and interaction in an ELT master's program?

3) Which ELT and non-teaching courses do pre- and in-service teachers perceive as significant contributions to their career development?

4) How do education administrators, experienced teachers, pre-service English teachers, and ELT masters' graduates perceive of an ELT master's program?

Literature Review

1. English Language Education in Thailand

Throughout Thailand, English is a mandatory subject in schools from the primary to the tertiary levels (Baker, 2012). A majority of schools in the country recognize that English is an important means of international communication and therefore seek to encourage learners to be fluent in the language. Besides, schools in Thailand acknowledge the importance of English which has developed into a primary international language and occupies a significant function in global communication (Crystal, 2003).

However, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in different settings is complicated, and consequently not an easy task for Thai teachers of English (Pattapong, 2015). In many Thai schools, the instruction in English classes is delivered through the medium of the Thai language. In language instruction, Thai teachers often do not use English, or use it to a minimal extent, thus limiting their students' ability to learn and produce the language (Dhanasobhon, 2006). Moreover, instead of teaching the students to communicate effectively in English, the commonly used method of teaching English in Thailand is through the use of Thai-English translation, which sometimes causes confusion for students (Darasawang, 2007).

Furthermore, the confidence and competence of teachers of English is indicated by the use of the native language in an English class. Hadla

(2013) contends that self-esteem and proficiency are linked, and that the teachers' image can be affected by a deficiency of language skills, thereby leading to low self-confidence. However, by giving time to continual practice, teachers can enhance their language abilities. According to Saville - Troike (2006), although teachers are not expected to be as fluent in English as native English speakers, they need to have a good command of English so as to be good models for learners.

In the area of pedagogy, teachers' instructional knowledge and their ability to teach occupy a vital function in developing students' language as well as teachers' linguistic abilities. Darasawang (2007) argues that conventional teaching techniques continue to prevail in English lessons in many Thai schools. Teachers of English utilize the lecture method exclusively, meaning that the teachers talk and the students listen. This involves reading aloud, passive reading or viewing a video presentation, translating from English to Thai, as well as learning grammar rules and memorizing vocabulary. Currently, such techniques continue to be utilized despite the fact that previous studies advocate learning language by combining other instructional methods (Buehl, 2001).

Arunsuksawang and Sungrusa (2015) state that teachers and students themselves affect the students' lower proficiency of English. To clarify this point, Thai teachers of English have uninteresting instructional styles since they fail to motivate their students in the learning process, which has a negative impact on the students' attention and concentration on their second language (L2) learning. Besides, it also reduces students' interest in practicing their L2 and anticipation of having relevant learning experiences. Furthermore, Waenthong (1999) states that even though Thai students have been studying English language for a number of years, they still have low proficiency in English speaking

and writing. This is due to teachers' low language proficiency as well as the absence of meaningful tasks. According to Paul and Norbury (2012), the lack of meaningful tasks that provide them with opportunities to use English has an impact on their exposure to English, limiting learners' English proficiency and making it difficult to use the language.

In summary, difficulties in teaching and learning English language in Thailand still remains although teachers should have the skills to coordinate knowledge of the target language in order to utilize the principles and theories of language teaching (Ministry of Education of Thailand, 2006). However, the pedagogical and linguistic abilities of English language teachers continue to have a marked impact upon students' development and language learning.

2. English Teachers' Qualifications

Over the years, teachers have attached significance to the knowledge acquired by each person, meaning that they know how students think and learn, and how the teachers themselves should convey their knowledge to their students. Such awareness affects what is required for teachers to enable them to prepare efficient instruction. A greater student achievement is obtained by teachers who are well prepared with meaningful instructions and tasks (Hutchinson, 2013).

The Ministry of Education of Thailand (2006) states that pre-service teachers in the language teaching area should have the following qualifications: (1) an ethical standard for foreign language teachers, such as protecting the confidentiality of all students and constantly displaying respect and positive regard for them; (2) the ability to coordinate knowledge of the English language as well as linguistics or applied linguistics in order to plan effective English lessons, teach English as well as the cultures, enable students to practice, and use it to attain

meaningful tasks; (3) the ability to apply teaching theories, and to have vision and leadership in the profession to improve language teaching and learning; (4) sensitivity towards learners' feeling by being good listeners and by strengthening interpersonal relationships; (5) critical thinking in order to choose appropriate teaching resources or materials which motivate and maintain students' interests; and (6) expertise in designing differentiated lessons and instructions for diverse learners. As suggested by Adipat (2018), teachers should always be aware of the differences of learners, starting from the process of creating lessons, delivering an effective presentation, monitoring learner progress, and making accurate determination on learner performance.

For accreditation endeavors by the Commission for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) in the United States of America, teachers need to be knowledgeable and skilled in their subject area and acknowledge that language is acquired most effectively when it is taught in meaningful contexts. They also need to manage learning in an appropriate and organized manner, which enables students to meet their learning goals. Additionally, they should have the ability to perform well in the following areas reflecting optimal instructional practice: assessment, culture, implementation and management of instruction, language, planning and professionalism (TESOL International Association, 2009). Besides, in the technological era, there are positive outcomes of technology-supplemented instruction as it promotes student-centered environment which encourages students to become more independent and take responsibilities for their own learning (Gilakjani, 2014; Arifah, 2014).

In the present study, the researchers realize the importance of conducting the systematic task of learners' needs analysis in order to design a curriculum that will improve English teachers' quality. In particular, the needs analysis enables the researchers to achieve the

objectives of developing a new English language teaching curriculum (Nunan, 1988) and to guarantee that any curriculum which is prepared is relevant for improving the abilities and knowledge of students, and would not waste resources and time (Barbazette, 2006). Graves (2000) advocates that the information regarding subjective needs (their expectation of themselves or of the course as well as their attitudes) and objective needs (factual information such as students' background information like age, gender, family, education, profession, language proficiency, and language use in practical situations) can be received from persons associated with the course such as administrators, teachers, students, and occasionally parents. Murray (2009) claims that such useful information allows the researchers to prepare a curriculum relevant to students' needs, leading to effective language teaching and the fulfillment of previously formulated objectives.

Methods

In response to the stated objectives, two data collection approaches were employed: a questionnaire and interviews. A questionnaire was used to elicit data regarding pre- and in-service teachers' needs and expectations of an ELT master's program. Interviews were conducted to gain their opinions on the needs for an ELT master's program at the administrative and institutional levels. The following sections discuss about the research instruments employed in the current study.

1. Questionnaire

Developed under the supervision of the advisory panel, the questionnaire was built and centered on the purposes of the study and the mandates from Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), Thailand. The online questionnaire was administered on Google Form platform. The questionnaire respondents include pre- and in-service teachers, principals, master's

degree graduates, and the chair of Curriculum and Instruction department. The choices of participants were based solely on recommendations and accessibility. In this questionnaire, there are two sections: demographic information and master's degree program management. In the demographic section, participants were asked to give their background information regarding gender, age, highest level of education, current or most recent job, English related responsibility, and needs to pursue an ELT master's degree. Those who showed their interests in the degree proceeded to the next section which has to do with management aspects of the program (see Table 1). Before submitting the questionnaire, the participants were encouraged to freely write other recommendations. The questionnaire responses were quantitatively and qualitatively discussed in order to address the research questions.

2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a department chair, two education administrators, two experienced English teachers, two senior-year pre-service teachers of English, and two ELT master's graduates. All of the participants are Thai and speak Thai as their native language. Eight interview questions were proposed addressing three different areas: the importance of English; desirable characteristics of an English teacher; and the importance of an ELT master's program at both organizational and national levels. The interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner; that is, apart from the proposed questions, additional sub-questions were used to address other interesting features that emerged during the interviews. The participants were interviewed in Thai, but the data were transcribed, translated, and presented in English.

Findings

This section reports the questionnaire and interview findings.

1. Questionnaire Findings

The first part of the questionnaire deals with personal information of the participants. Initially, there were 90 individuals completing the online questionnaire through Google Form. A majority of the participants was female ($n=67$, 74%), and over 80 percent of the participants ($n=74$) aged under 35. Approximately 80 percent of the participants ($n=72$) have English related jobs, and the rest have no working experience. Out of the 90 participants, 59 percent of the participants ($n = 53$) show their interests in an ELT master's program, and thus, they were asked to proceed to the next section. However, 11 of the 53 participants withdrew from participation halfway through the questionnaire for personal reasons, leaving 42 participants continuing to complete the questionnaire.

The second section begins with the plan of the program. As for teaching and learning program hours, more than 80 percent of the participants ($n=35$) voted for weekend classes. The thesis plan remains popular with about 66 percent of all participants ($n=28$); however, the independent study (IS) plan is still preferred by some participants ($n=24$, 33%).

Participants were then asked to rate the proposed aspects of the program from strongly agree to strongly disagree (see Table 1). It was found that over 80 percent of the participants either strongly agreed or agreed with English-medium instruction and classroom interactions, and that thesis is written in English. 90 percent of the participants ($n=38$) concurred with the ideas of fully and partially distance learning, and that the program involves lecturers from various institutions. Similarly, short courses and workshops with a partner university oversea were very much preferred by the participants ($n=41$, 97%). Conference presentation and publication were also preferred by around 70 percent of the participants ($n=30$).

Table 1: Management aspects of an ELT master's program

Aspects	The Number of Participants				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
English as a medium of instruction	21 (50%)	16 (38%)	5 (11.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
English as a medium of interactions	21 (50%)	17 (40.4%)	4 (9.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Thesis written in English	13 (30.9%)	22 (52.3%)	6 (14.2%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Fully distance learning	14 (33.3%)	17 (40.4%)	6 (14.2%)	5 (11.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Partially distance learning	13 (30.9%)	21 (50%)	3 (7.1%)	5 (11.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Lecturers from various different institutions	22 (52.3%)	16 (38%)	3 (7.1%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Supplementary English courses	28 (66.6%)	13 (30.9%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
An oversea short training	28 (66.6%)	13 (30.9%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Courses with a partner university oversea	23 (54.7%)	18 (42.8%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Conference presentation	13 (30.9%)	17 (40.4%)	10 (23.8%)	2 (4.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Publication in partial fulfillment of the degree completion	11 (26.1%)	21 (50%)	10 (23.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Apropos core courses, Technologies and Innovations in ELT was most selected with 26 responses (62%), followed by Teaching English for

Specific Purposes, Teaching English for Academic Purposes, and English as a Global Language respectively (see Figure 1).

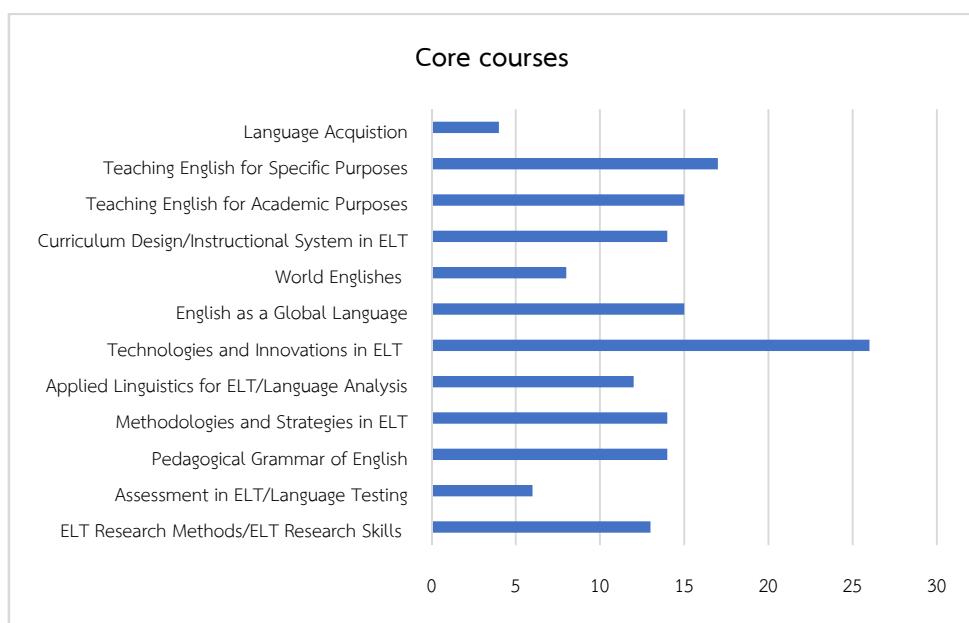


Figure 1: Core courses

As for non-teaching courses, English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic

Purposes were most selected, followed by Current Issues and Trends in ELT (see Figure 2).

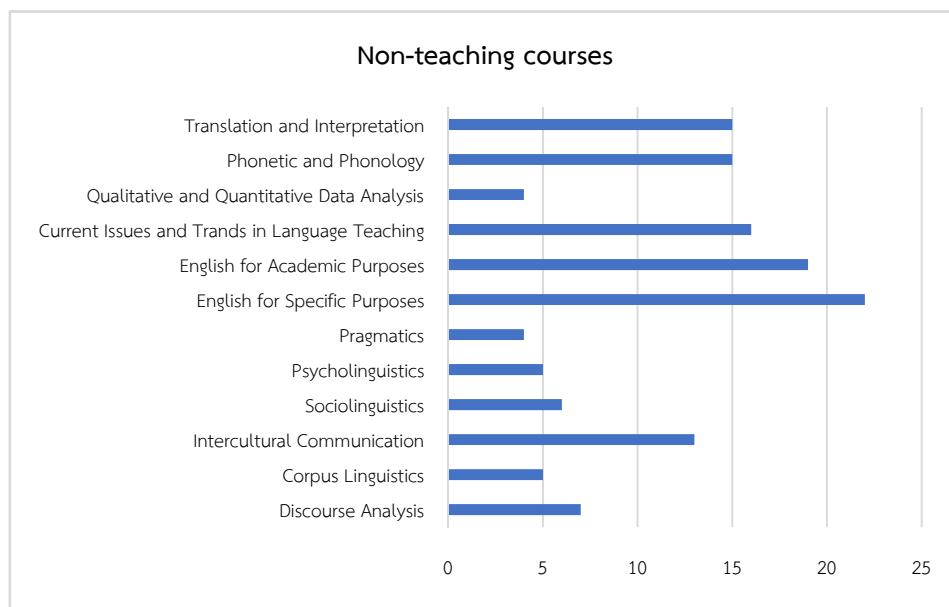


Figure 2: Non-teaching courses

2. Interview Findings

The data obtained from the interviews with nine participants revealed that English has grown into the primary language for international communication and has played such an important role in the worldwide communication due to the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the national policy on Thailand 4.0. Knowledge of English language and of different cultures could reduce barriers or obstacles to effective communication and promote opportunities for career growth. In Thailand, however, English has been taught within an English as a foreign language (EFL) context where learners were not required to use English in their daily lives. Therefore, their exposure to English was limited, resulting in difficulties using the English language.

From the interviews, English learning in classrooms was mainly focused on grammar and vocabulary rather than on encouraging students or providing them with opportunities to produce or use the target language spontaneously in authentic settings. The participants then indicated that there was a growing demand for

knowledgeable and skilled teachers of English to improve Thai learners at all grade levels in English language skills. Additionally, some required qualifications include subject-matter knowledge, an advanced level of English proficiency, pedagogical skills, knowledge of conducting assessment for students' performance, and a strong commitment to the profession. English teachers should also possess relevant research-related knowledge, enabling them to conduct research to cope with problems arisen in class or help their English language learners overcome the difficulties they encounter while learning the language. Apart from the aforementioned qualifications, teachers should adapt their teaching to the social changes in the technological era. Technology should therefore be integrated in English classrooms due to its primary advantages of promoting student autonomy and increasing motivation and attitudes towards English language learning.

The participants also indicated that, with a systematically developed curriculum, prospective ELT master's degree students would expand their knowledge about the English language, improve their teaching skills, and integrate technology in their instruction. All these applied to the prospective

students currently working as school teachers, university lecturers, tutors, educators, administrators, or others who plan to work in the field of language teaching, education and/or any other fields. More importantly, being good role models in creating learning environment with L2 integrated content could springboard teachers' career growth or enable language learners to demonstrate the capability in English they possess.

Discussions

The needs and expectations on the ELT master's program were sought from a department chair, two education administrators, two experienced English teachers, two senior-year pre-service teachers of English, and two ELT master's graduates.

The ELT master's program values professional development opportunities for teachers of English. The results of the present study contribute important information to the curriculum development. In some instance, prospective graduate students reported that they preferred English as a medium of learning and teaching and take a short course abroad. This reflects the emphasis of expected English language skills, experiences in using English in authentic settings, and the participants' attitudes for their academic and professional success. It is advocated by the claim from the ASEAN Charter (2008) that individuals who have advanced abilities in English language would have more job opportunities than those who have lower abilities in English. In addition, the Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter states that the working language of ASEAN shall be English (ASEAN Charter, 2008). It is considered to be advantageous for those who are more fluent in English to have better employment opportunities in the ASEAN Economic Community than those who are less fluent.

Despite focusing on English proficiency, the needs indicated by the Thai teachers of English are considered as key factors in the development

of the ELT master's program. Among those needs, the participants stated that the knowledge of utilizing technology together with fully and partially distance learning in the program were most preferred. Likewise, the findings from the interviews show that the participants considered technology as an important tool in self language learning. Gilakjani (2014) and Arifah (2014) also found that technology could promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning.

The participants reported that they would be likely to take the courses such as English for specific and/or academic purposes at the graduate levels that were different from pedagogical coursework at the undergraduate level. All this is to suggest that the participants perceived these courses as significant contributions to their career development.

In terms of the lecturers' qualifications, academic expenses (tuition and fees), and weekend class schedule, they were also considered as key factors for the prospective students to make a decision on the selection of a degree program. Regarding the lecturers' qualification, lecturers are often seen with a high value to boost students' confidence towards the decision making in their graduate program selection. In the view of academicians, the lecturers' high qualification reflects a credibility and reliable information for the prospective students to use for their decision making (Jupiter et al., 2017). As previously noted, expenses of tuition and fees were one of the main elements taken into account because a majority of prospective students were those who came out with own sponsorship and without any scholarships (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). Therefore, affordable tuition and fees would be an option for those who do not have financial support. In terms of the class time, the results of the study show that the weekend class schedule was highly indicated. This could be that most of prospective students were teachers at schools

with busy work schedules, so the weekend class schedule was in high demand.

Conclusions

This study identifies the factors that influence the decision of prospective students in choosing a master's program in English Language Teaching (ELT) at Ramkhamheang University. The participants provided information needed for the curriculum development through an online questionnaire, and valuable feedback was received through interviews with nine participants including a department chair at Ramkhamhaeng University (RU), education administrators, experienced teachers, RU pre-service English teachers, and ELT master graduates from a master's program at Ramkhamhaeng University. The findings and practical implications are suggested to the university and the program committee in driving recruitment strategies to attract prospective students. The attitudes towards the use of English as a medium in teaching and learning in the program of study were positive as the participants considered that using English in and outside classroom settings would boost their self-confidence and self-esteem in English communication. In terms of courses in the program of the study, ELT and non-teaching courses such as technology and innovation were highly recommended to include in the degree program.

Suggestions for Future Research

The results of the current study are valuable and beneficial for educators, curriculum developers, and institution administrators to investigate some empirical evidences in order that they will develop and improve their programs of study to accommodate prospective students' needs in pursuing a higher degree in ELT. The findings from the study also yield information for curriculum developers and instructors to design ELT master's programs and provide insights for pedagogical and non-pedagogical course

management. As collaboration with educational institutions in Thailand and overseas has been indicated in the present study, additional research on the collaboration with external alliances such as exchanging lecturers from different institutions are suggested with sufficient groups of participants to do meaningful analyses.

Implications of the Research Results

For the practical implications for the curriculum developers, educators and university administrators need to understand that students' performance over the course of their studies may vary according to individual factors and other related variables. Considering financial issues and changing trends in English language teaching, the educators and the administrators may create a set of strategies to support the students' needs.

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