Local Context-Based English Lessons: Forging Northern Thai knowledge, Fostering English Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation and regionalisation have culminated in the highlighted role of the English language for diverse realms of people across the world, including the ASEAN region and Thailand. To a number of scholars, the spread of English may result in negative consequences, possibly subjugating and menacing the national culture and identity of the English language learners. Thus, a burgeoning issue that emerges in the Thai context is how the students' English language can be improved while maintaining their Thai identity. Given that young Thai learners tend to have relatively limited exposure to the national Thai identity due to their young age, this study focuses on a specific local identity – northern Thailand. This paper aims to demonstrate that a set of northern Thainess-based instructional innovations designed for Grade 4 students in the northern region of Thailand can boost not only northern Thainess knowledge but also English vocabulary knowledge related to northern Thailand. This set of the English lessons, as well as the corresponding northern Thainess and English vocabulary pretests and posttests, was constructed and implemented in four elementary schools in the northern part of Thailand. A comparison of the pretest and posttest scores on northern Thainess and vocabulary revealed that the students' Thainess and vocabulary knowledge substantially increased, demonstrating the potential positive impacts of local Thainess-based instructional materials. The findings demonstrate a reverse perspective regarding the role of English in relation to Thai identity. Pedagogical implications regarding English material construction can be informed to ameliorate elementary English education in Thailand.

Keywords: Thai identity; vocabulary; northern Thainess; elementary education; local context based-English lessons

INTRODUCTION

A prevailing notion of globalisation highlights the role of the English language as the language of power and prestige. To dwell on this notion, and by extension, as far as culture is concerned, cultural imperialism is to be emphasised, while the local cultural identities are being deemphasised (Hewitt 2014). Given the influence of English hegemony and a number of trends generated from globalisation, national identity has emerged as one of the major concerns among scholars, educators, and even politicians for fear that it will be threatened or subjugated by other influential cultures. Correspondingly, a number of measures have been implemented to protect and promote national identity in individual countries (Borden 2014, Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh 2011, Goodman & West-Olatunji 2010, Hughes 2013, Makoe 2014).

In the Thai scenario, Hewitt's 2014 remark has proved to be valid, particularly in the urban areas of Bangkok and major cities of the country where western-imposed globalisation features are predominant. The prevalence and prominence of these powerful features undoubtedly infiltrate the lives of Thai people. Thai scholars envisage that this constant preoccupation of western-imposed globalisation and globalisation may have a detrimental effect on national Thai culture if no action is taken (Simpson & Thammasathien 2007). To worsen the scenario, towards the end of 2015, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN has agreed to designate English as the working language of the region. This designation heightens the need for every ASEAN member nation to improve their citizen's English in order to compete regionally and internationally. Globalisation and the promotion

of English in the region has not only contributed to the highlighted role of the English language, but also the imminent subjugation or disruption of Thai culture. The effect is that Thai individuals are even more prone to western-imposed globalisation.

Despite the crucial need to improve Thai citizens' English, English education in Thailand is woefully inadequate. Thai learners of English do not seem to be performing well in the English language across the entire academic paradigm, in spite of substantial exposure to globalisation trends and western-imposed modernisation (e.g., Kanoksilapatham 2014, Prapphal 2003, Wongsothorn et al. 2002). A myriad of factors are speculated to be responsible for the unsatisfactory performance of Thai learners of English including teachers, learners, and learning materials. In relevance to this study, commercial English textbooks prescribed for English education in elementary schools receive our special attention. These commercial English textbooks with the target users being elementary students in diverse areas of the world usually focus on the cultural features of English speaking people, contributing very little to the students' national identity maintenance.

At this juncture, it can be said that it is impossible to resist such global forces like globalisation or regionalisation. Similarly, it is impossible to allow Thai identity to be dismissed or subjugated. It should be noted that this paper does not assume that these two issues are conflicting or competing areas. In contrast, this study shows that these two putatively confronting forces can be manipulated to be significantly and mutually reciprocal. That is, in addition to its traditioinal role as one of the means of western-imposed globalisation, the English language can also be employed as a means to propagate and instill Thai national identity in Thai learners of English. In order to ease the perpetuating tension or to strike a balance between the need to ameliorate English and the desire to maintain Thainess or Thai identity, young Thai learners can navigate and instill their Thai identity while engaging in English language learning. This proposition is in line with schema theory (Alderson 2000), which advocates the benefits of exposing language learners to new information that can be related to their existing knowledge to facilitate their comprehension. By extension, it is expected that, with the exposure to English lessons that focus on Thai contexts, Thai learners are likely to improve their English. Unfortunately, there has been no research that examines the impacts of integrating Thainess or Thai cultural identities into English lessons for Thai learners.

Thai cultural identity manifests itself in a myriad of ways, including both concrete and abstract entities. In this study, tourist attractions represent one of the areas of Thai cultural knowledge that can be employed to instill a sense of local Thainess awareness and local Thai identity, particularly in young Thai learners of English. This study specifically aims to examine the benefits of English lessons constructed based on northern Thailand tourist attractions in fostering the learners' northern Thai identity whilst expanding their English vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, the study provides insights into how the English language can be manipulated as a tool to communicate local Thai culture. Based on the findings, pedagogical practices and implications are offered to ameliorate and strengthen English language teaching in Thailand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of notions were synthesised to help determine the design of the study including the impact of globalisation and regionalisation on the English language and national culture, English language education in Thailand and its hindering factors, prescribed English textbooks and cultural features, and local Thai identity and elementary English education.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL CULTURE

Since the turn of the 21st century, many countries including Thailand have witnessed the unwavering enthusiasm for learning English. Due to the ongoing trend of globalisation, the English language has attained the status of an international language. Moreover, this particular region of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) has witnessed another remarkable transition for English language education - the advent of regionalisation or AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) integration that took place towards the end of 2015. This integration has not only resulted in economic cooperation but also the designation of the English language as the working language of the ASEAN region. In this regard, both trends of globalisation and regionalisation have culminated in the highlighted role of the English language in diverse realms of people in the ASEAN region.

It has been a serious concern for many communities that the increasing hegemony of the English language tends to exert certain negative effects on national identity (Barghouthi 2008, Henao 2017, Suarez 2002, Turnbull 2017). In addition, an increasing influx of the English language and western-based influences further exacerbate the scenario. Two countries in Asia exemplify this situation. First, Japan is a nation with a long history filled with a myriad of cultural identities. The Japanese are not comfortable with the wave of globalisation hitting the country. They believe that the increased pressures of globalisation and the influx of influences from the west or westernisation are a threat to the country's national identity (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, McKenzie 2010, Turnbull 2017).

Similarly, Thailand is another Asian country that has long-standing historical and cultural traditions. However, interestingly, a myriad of aspects of daily activities of the Thai people, particularly in urban communities, demonstrate the high visibility of English language use. Moreover, the tremendous influx of English cultural products manifested through pop songs, fashion, and movies possibly puts national Thai culture in a vulnerable position (Jory 2003). In short, Thai culture is being challenged by English hegemony (Laungaramsri 2003, 2012, Simpson & Thammasthien 2007).

As voiced by Kubota (2002) and Liddicoat (2007), these senarios as described above in Japan and Thailand, for example, raise concerns regarding strategies to maintain national culture in the midst of English hegemony. A number of scholars integrated the significance of identity to gain insights into the dynamics of language learning and teaching (Borton 2000, Block 2007, Barkhuizen 2017). At this point, the pendulum has swung back to the major concern of maintaining national identity while attempts to ameliorate English language education have emerged to be a major and burgeoning concern.

ENGLISH EDUCATION IN THAILAND: PRESCRIBED TEXTBOOKS AND CULTURAL FEATURES

Despite the prominent place accorded to English and its long established role in Thailand, English language education in Thailand has encountered a number of obstacles and constraints. Based on a number of national and international assessments, Thai learners' English proficiency and performance have been congruently identified as "unsatisfactory" across the entire education paradigm and for an extended period of time (Fernquest 2017, Kanoksilapatham 2017, 2014, Prapphal 2003, Wongsothorn et al. 2002). It is thus hard or almost impossible to deny that Thais' English proficiency, as well as English education, needs to be urgently ameliorated. Certain strategies need to be devised to deal with the situation and to enhance Thai learners' English.

A number of hindering factors are speculated to be held accountable for Thai learners' poor English performance, be they the students' lack of motivation, inadequate and inappropriate teaching materials, or under-qualified English language teachers (Kanoksilapatham 2014, 2016). In a setting in which English is learned as a second or foreign

language, textbook features play a crucial part determining, to a certain extent, the success of language learning outcomes (Razi 2003, as cited by Razmjoo 2007). Unfortunately, developing textbooks that correspond to a specific curriculum or address specific goals of learners in a specific context is an extremely daunting and challenging task. Currently, as is the case in Thailand, textbooks used in public schools are usually prescribed by the Ministry of Education. The textbooks available are usually commercialised, and produced by international publishers for diverse groups of English language learners in different parts of the world. As a consequence, the contents of the textbooks produced by these publishers do not delve into a particular context, but instead focus on presenting the cultural features pertaining to the cultures of English speaking countries. In short, commerical textbooks with features concentrating on Engish hegemony do not take into consideration local cultures or contexts. As a result, local contexts are likely to be ignored or underrepresented. Given the age of young learners and the possible difficulty in connecting with the lessons presented in commercial textbooks, learners might find it difficult to be motivated to learn English or, simply, to appreciate English.

According to Tomlinson (2011), ideal textbooks should address the learners' community needs, featuring authentic materials, subjects, culture, and language. It is expected that these features of the materials, if appropriate, would arouse or raise the learners' interest. Pedagogically, an ideal textbook should integrate learners' national identity features or local features. Psychologically, this type of textbook would be less daunting for the learners, allowing them to focus on the language and free them from worrying about the content presented in the textbooks.

National identity is a complex construct, encompassing a large number of traits including, arts, architecture, religion, history, literature, geography, way of life, customs, and entertainment (Anwaruddin 2012, Barrett 2000, Jerome et al. 2016). Some of these traits are more concrete than others. Similarly, some of them are more readily digestible by advanced learners, whereas a number of them are appropriate for young learners. In this regard, elementary education plays an important role providing a rudimentary foundation for the entire education paradigm. Moreover, as remarked by a number of scholars (Chinh 2013, Zhengzheng 2014), national identity needs to be instilled in learners at a young age so that they are fully equipped with their solid national identity. When they are subsequently exposed to other cultures, they will be more than able to appreciate the differences and compare their national identity with new cultural experiences.

At this juncture, in relation to the centrality of instilling national identity in young learners and in English language learning, vocabulary receives our special attention. It is widely understood that vocabulary is one of the indispensable building blocks for other language skills to develop (e.g., Cobb 2007, Coxhead 2006, Nation 2001). Therefore, for a solid foundation of language learning and a smooth transition to the other language skills, the mastery of vocabulary pertaining to the specific culture in focus is necessary and thus needs to be assessed.

In summary, this section suggests that it is imperative that English language learning and teaching in Thailand be developed so that Thailand can compete with other countries in the region and in the world. To address this concern, the construction of English lessons based on national Thai culture can be considered a possible effective strategy to develop Thai learners' English abilities. However, national Thai culture can be quite pervasive, covering a wide range of constructs. Therefore, to accommodate the target participants of this study who are Grade 4 English learners, and to make sure the lesson contents are manageable and not too cognitively overloading, the local culture of northern Thailand represented by tourist attractions in this part of Thailand seems to be appropriate.

THE STUDY

OBJECTIVE

The present study aims to examine the impacts of northern Thainess-based English lessons on the development of young Thai learners' northern Thainess knowledge and English vocabulary knowledge. Specifically, this study has the objective to determine whether the set of northern Thainess-based lessons can help improve both the learners' northern Thai knowledge as well as English vocabulary knowledge related to northern Thailand tourist attractions.

SCHOOL CONTEXTS AND PARTICIPANTS

The context of the study was set specifically in the northern part of Thailand. The participants of this study were elementary students of four public schools located in four different provinces in northern Thailand. The four schools were randomly selected based on three criteria: 1) technological readiness with a computer and a projector available for instructional purposes, 2) cooperative willingness to participate in this implementation for the entire implementation phase of ten weeks, and 3) flexibility with regard to classroom time of the implementation.

One class from each school with students of mixed English proficiency levels was selected by respective school principals. Grade 4 students (9 - 10 years old) were purposefully selected for the following reasons. First, English education in public schools in Thailand begins in Grade 1. This means that by the time they are in Grade 4, they have learned how to read and write in English. These Grade 4 students' previous English exposure would thus have prepared them to be somewhat ready for the implementation of the materials developed in this study. Second, Thai 4th graders are free from national examinations that require additional preparation; otherwise, the implementation of this research might not be possible. In total, 119 Grade 4 students from four schools in four northern provinces participated in this study.

PROCEDURES

The procedures of this study can be categorised into three major phases: instrument construction including eight lessons and two sets of tests (northern Thailand knowledge and vocabulary knowledge related to tourist attractions), lesson implementation, and lesson assessment using the two sets of tests. The following sections describe research activities pertaining to each phase in detail.

MATERIAL CONSTRUCTION: LESSONS AND TESTS

This phase of material construction is considered the most important, forming a major part of this study involving the construction of the entire set of the lessons and two assessment instruments.

To begin with, a set of English lessons based on northern Thailand features or northern Thainess-based lessons was constructed, through which the northern young learners are allowed to explore their own local identity. To make sure that the lesson contents are indeed relevant to the learners' northern Thai locality, needs analysis using a survey questionnaire was deemed to be the best means to determine the topics of the English lessons. It is noted that a wide variety of constructs defines northern Thainess (be they historical sites, ways of life, customs, environment, geography), and the whole range of northern Thai identities cannot possibly be implemented as teaching materials for young learners. Due to

the learners' relatively young age, concrete and tangible northern Thai features would work more effectively than abstract ones. In this regard, tourist attractions seem to be one of the most tangible elements or dimensions that characterise Thai identity. Moreover, the focus on tourist attractions allows English language learners to relate to their immediate environment, developing a sense of belonging and enhancing the authenticity of the lessons. This study thus opted to define northern Thai identity using tourist attractions in northern Thailand.

Which tourist attractions in northern Thailand should be included in the lessons? To address this question, a survey questionnaire was devised as an instrument for needs analysis, consisting of 32 tourist attractions generated by an Internet search – all of which are located in different provinces in northern Thailand. A total of 1,870 questionnaires were randomly distributed to local residents in 17 northern Thai provinces (110 copies for each province). The respondents - local community members - were to choose eight out of the 32 items on the questionnaire that they thought elementary students in northern Thailand should be aware of. Completed questionnaires (1,698) were obtained and subsequently analysed to identify the top eight most popular sites to be the topics of the eight northern Thainess-based lessons.

Based on the eight tourist attractions, eight English lessons were constructed, following the same pattern and format. Given the significant role of vocabulary in language learning, as recommended by a number of scholars (e.g., Cobb 2007, Coxhead 2006, Folse 2011, Martinez 2014, Nation 1990, 2001), individual lessons begin with ten selected English vocabulary items pertaining to the topics of the lessons. In addition, the target words chosen were meaningful, accessible, and essential for each lesson (Graves et al. 2014, Schmitt 1997, Sokmen 1997). To exemplify, Figure 1 presents a list of ten words targeted in *Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple* - one of the most popular tourist attractions in northern Thailand commonly known among tourists as "the White Temple" in Figure 2.

Lesson 1 Rong Khun Temple	
VOCABULARY	
temple	วัด
design	ออกแบบ
temple hall	พระอุโบสถ
purity	ความบริสุทธิ์
the Buddha	พระพุทธเจ้า
bridge	สะพาน
pond	สระน้ำ
in front of	ช้างหน้า
painting	ภาพวาด
inside	ภายใน

FIGURE 1. Target vocabulary for Lesson 1
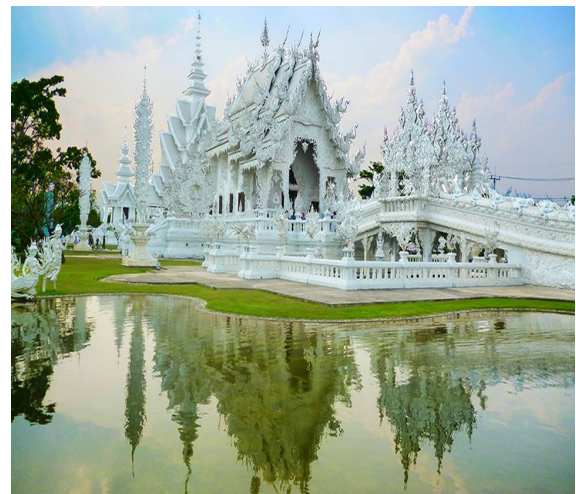
FIGURE 2. Rong Khun Temple or the White Temple

According to Nation (1990, 2001) and McCarten (2007), in order to facilitate language learners' acquisition of new vocabulary items and enhance their vocabulary knowledge, the vocabulary needs to be presented and practiced in context in order to provide background information that subsequently facilitates the understanding of those specific words. In this regard, the ten words at the beginning of each lesson are contextualised in the subsequent part of six to eight English sentences pertaining to the topic of the individual

lessons. At this juncture, to make sure that the contents and the English language used in individual lessons are appropriate in terms of difficulty level, four Grade 4 English teachers from the participating schools were invited to validate the lesson contents. Some sentences were grammatically and lexically modified based on the teachers' suggestions. Some of the suggestions included the removal of passive constructions and the preferred use of simple sentences. Lexically, for instance, the word "travel" was replaced by the word "go". Figure 3 illustrates the sentences belonging to *Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple*, with the target words highlighted in bold.

Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple

1. Rong Khun **Temple** is in Chiang Rai (Province).
2. Chalermchai Kositpipat **designed** this temple.
3. Rong Khun Temple has a **temple hall**.
4. The **temple hall** is white.
5. White means the **purity** of **the Buddha**.'
6. A **bridge** and a small **pond** are **in front of** the temple hall.
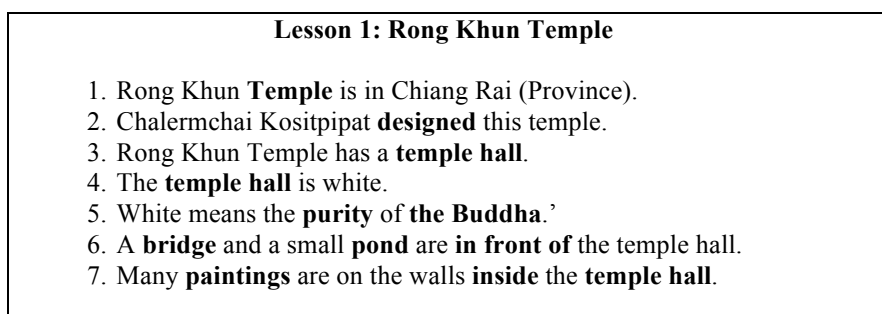7. Many **paintings** are on the walls **inside** the **temple hall**.

FIGURE 3. Lesson 1 – Rong Khun Temple

Based on the theme of northern Thailand tourist attractions, proper names pertaining to northern Thai features are expectedly inevitable. To promote young learners' comprehension and remembrance, a number of strategies suggested by different scholars were employed. For instance, to facilitate the learners' comprehension, proper names, if used, are accompanied by corresponding Thai transliterations provided in parentheses (Camo & Ballester 2015). In addition, the presentation of the ten words in each lesson is accompanied by L1 equivalents (Joyce 2015). Moreover, to enhance visibility of the words in the lessons and to allow the words to be more noticeable to the students, the target words are also highlighted (Schmitt 1997). When possible, the words are recycled, encouraging the students to integrate the target words from different lessons to help express their northern Thai identity (Nation 2015, Webb Newton & Chang 2013).

The handouts for the lessons developed, as previously described, were distributed to the young learners in class, and the corresponding PowerPoint slides projected onto a screen in the classroom. To make these learning materials more vivid, attractive, and stimulating, a set of multimedia materials corresponding to individual lessons was constructed, depicting the individual tourist attractions. The multimedia materials pertaining to each of the eight lessons are videos lasting from 8 to 10 minutes.

With regard to testing materials, two sets of tests were generated from the contents of the eight northern Thai lessons: northern Thainess test and English vocabulary test. The objective of the northern Thainess test is to assess the students' knowledge regarding northern Thailand's tourist attractions both before and after the exposure to the instruction. To assure that this northern Thainess test measures what it was designed to measure, the test was written in Thai so that the students could focus on the contents. Moreover, to make sure that the northern Thainess test is not too cognitively overloading for Grade 4 students, the test contents were validated by four social science school teachers in northern Thailand. The northern Thainess test includes 40 items, with 5 items representing individual lessons. This test involves minimal writing from the students, as they were required to complete the blank in Thai for each item. Figure 4 exemplifies a set of five northern Thainess test items generated from *Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple*. These items are originally in Thai but presented here in English for convenience.
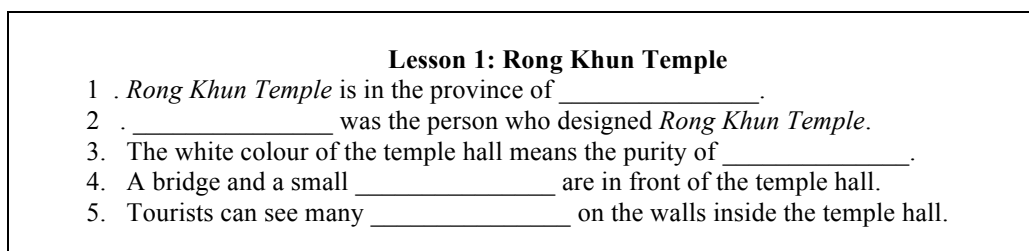

Lesson 1: Rong Khun Temple

1 . *Rong Khun Temple* is in the province of _____.
2 . _____ was the person who designed *Rong Khun Temple*.
3. The white colour of the temple hall means the purity of _____.
4. A bridge and a small _____ are in front of the temple hall.
5. Tourists can see many _____ on the walls inside the temple hall.

FIGURE 4. Northern Thainess test

The other test developed in this study is the vocabulary test. The objective of this test is to assess the impact of the northern Thainess-based lessons on the learners' English vocabulary knowledge. Similar to the northern Thainess test, the vocabulary test consists of 40 items taken from the eight lessons, with five words selected from each lesson. As asserted by Nation (1990), vocabulary knowledge encapsulates various types of linguistic knowledge including pronunciation, spelling, morphology, syntactic and semantic relationships meaning, and collocation. Moreover, vocabulary knowledge can be further categorised as active (receptive) and passive (productive) knowledge (for more details, see Nation, 2001). Given the young age of the students, the limited opportunities to actively use the English language in communication, and the predominant role of meaning, the vocabulary test for this study focuses on the students' ability to match the meaning (represented by a picture) with the word heard. In this study, no attempt was made to compel the students to demonstrate their productive vocabulary knowledge. To exemplify, Figure 5 shows the test item focusing on the word "temple". With four pictures presented (a, b, c, and d) for each item projected onto a screen, the students were to choose only one that matched the word heard. At this juncture, to make sure that this vocabulary test is not too daunting a task, the 40-word list as well as the pictures used was submitted to the four school teachers of English for approval. Based on these teachers' comments, a number of pictures were replaced to enhance the clarity of the test.

MATERIAL IMPLEMENTATION

It should be noted that the implementation of the lessons developed was not part of the schools' English curriculum. Thus the school administrators' flexibility and understanding was crucial to make sure that this project implementation was possible for a period of ten weeks. This implementation phase was a long, engaging period of ten weeks of interaction between the researcher and the students in the northern Thai region. In a classroom setting, Week 1 was the first encounter between the researcher and the students. In addition to ice-breaking activities, the students were informed of the purpose of this project, followed by the administration of the northern Thainess pretest and the vocabulary pretest, respectively.

The northern Thainess and vocabulary pretests were distributed to each student. The northern Thainess pretest was completed first, followed by the vocabulary pretest. Each test took the students approximately 20 minutes to complete. The instructions for both tests were given in Thai. For the northern Thainess pretest of 40 blank completion items, the students were required to write their answers in Thai. The vocabulary pretest required the student to listen to a word pronounced twice, while the four colour pictures were projected onto a screen (labelled a, b, c, and d) for the students to view. The students were required to choose one picture that best matched the word heard by marking a cross (X) on the corresponding letter on their answer sheet.

FIGURE 5. Vocabulary test

The instruction commenced in Week 2 after the completion of the two sets of pretests in the first class of Week 1. Each student received a handout of the introductory lesson, which follows the same format as the other eight lessons, displaying ten key words, which in turn are followed by a set of sentences relating to the tourist attractions in northern Thailand. This introductory lesson was to enable the students to get a general idea of what the class was all about, as well as give them some general information about northern Thailand.

After the introductory session in Week 1, one 2-hour lesson each week covered the eight topics, resulting in a total instructional period of 16 hours (Weeks 2 to 9). A handout for each lesson was distributed to the students. Based on the handout, a number of teaching and learning strategies were used to accomplish the goal of enhancing the learners' vocabulary and northern Thainess knowledge. Some of the strategies and activities executed for vocabulary instruction included repetition, drills, practice, games, and tasks, highlighting the pronunciation and meaning of the target words. Multimedia materials supplementing the lessons were presented to the students to support the constructed lessons and could be viewed again upon the learners' request, and when time was available.

THAINESS AND VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT

The third and final stage of this study evaluated the outcome of the implementation of the northern Thainess-based English lessons. This stage employed two sets of posttests (which were similar to the pretests) to assess both vocabulary and northern Thainess knowledge. Both tests were administered in Week 10 – the final week of the implementation.

For the northern Thainess knowledge posttest, the same procedure was conducted as that in the northern Thainess pretest. The purpose of the northern Thainess posttest was to find out whether the young Thai learners of English had developed their northern Thainess knowledge, after eight weeks of instruction. Similarly, the vocabulary posttest was used to determine whether these young learners had increased their vocabulary knowledge after exposure to the northern Thainess-based materials and instruction.

DATA ANALYSIS

The students' vocabulary and northern Thainess pretests and posttests were marked and scored: 1 for a correct answer, and 0 for an incorrect answer. For the northern Thainess test, the students were not penalised for misspelling, as long as the answers made sense. The scores of the northern Thainess and vocabulary pretests and posttests were analysed using descriptive statistics. To determine if the materials and instruction had a negative or positive impact on the students' test performance, descriptive statistics of the students' gain scores was performed. In order to observe how the students performed in the two tests over the eight-week instructional period, the pretest and posttest scores were analysed using a paired-samples *t*-test to determine whether there was a significant difference between the mean of the pretest and posttest scores.

RESULTS

The two sets of pretest and posttest scores of northern Thainess and vocabulary serve as the most crucial data source for this paper. Based on the pretest northern Thainess scores, as shown in Table 1, out of a total of 40 points, the mean score of 119 students from the four schools is 6.36. The number clearly indicates that the students in the northern region, particularly before the instruction, had relatively limited northern Thainess knowledge. Some students had no knowledge of tourist attractions in northern Thailand and scored zero in this test. The highest northern Thainess score of 15 did not even reach 50% of the total score, displaying that these young learners of English had very little knowledge about their locality.

However, after their exposure to the instruction for a period of eight weeks, the northern Thainess posttest scores reveal that the students attained an average score of 25.82 (also shown in Table 1). In this northern Thainess posttest, some students accomplished full marks of 40. To obtain a more accurate picture of how much the students had improved their Thainess knowledge, gain scores were analysed, revealing an average gain score of 19.45. Also in Table 1, a paired samples *t*-test shows that the mean scores of the pretest and posttest northern Thainess scores are significantly different. This finding indicates that the students' northern Thainess knowledge increased substantially after being exposed to the instruction.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics and paired-samples *t*-test of northern Thainess scores ($n = 119$; total $= 40$)

	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Pretest score	0	15	6.36	3.59
Posttest score	5	40	25.82	7.99
Gain score	3	34	19.45	7.59

$*t(118) = -27.965, p < .001$

The results for the vocabulary tests are as shown in Table 2. Out of a total of 40 points, the average pretest score across the four schools is 13.94, whereas that of the posttest score is 29.42, demonstrating a substantial increase of 15.48 points. To further examine whether the increase of 15.48 is significantly different, a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted

to compare the pretest and posttest mean scores of the vocabulary. A paired samples *t*-test result suggests that northern Thainess-based materials and instruction had a crucial and significant impact on the learners' vocabulary knowledge.

TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics and paired-samples *t*-test of vocabulary scores (*n* = 119; total = 40)

	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Pretest score	0	29	13.94	5.80
Posttest score	15	40	29.42	5.28
Gain score	1	36	15.48	7.06

*$t(118) = -23.921, p < .001$

These two sets of results, both on northern Thainess and vocabulary, congruently suggest that the northern Thainess-based materials and instruction contributed significantly to the young learners' northern Thainess and vocabulary knowledge development, evidenced by significantly improved scores. In summary, based on a survey conducted in the northern region of Thailand, a set of northern Thainess-based lessons was constructed, implemented, and assessed. The learners' significant gain scores in northern Thainess and vocabulary knowledge indicate the positive outcome of the instructional innovation, contributing to substantial development of northern Thainess awareness and vocabulary competence.

DISCUSSION

The objectives of this study are to demonstrate that the set of Thainess-based lessons constructed for 4th Graders focusing on tourist attractions in northern Thailand not only forges learners' northern Thainess knowledge, but also fosters English vocabulary knowledge related to northern Thailand tourist attractions. After the exposure to the instruction, and based on the pretest and posttest scores, the 4th grader students are more knowledgeable about northern Thainess. Similarly, the comparison of the students' vocabulary pretest and posttest scores shows that they are more proficient as far as their northern Thainess vocabulary repertoire is concerned. In short, the attempt to consolidate Thai learners' northern Thai identity and strengthen northern Thainess vocabulary through Thainess-based lessons was beneficial.

YOUNG LEARNERS' NORTHERN THAILAND AND VOCABULARY COMPETENCE

After the 8-week exposure to northern Thainess-based English lessons in this study, the students have become more knowledgeable of their locality and specifically the tourist attractions in northern Thailand, as evidenced by a substantial gain score in the northern Thainess test. Similarly, based on a substantial gain score in the vocabulary test, the students have become more competent as far as vocabulary related to northern Thai tourist attractions is concerned. These positive relationships can be attributed to a number of possible explanations generated from the notion of schemata (Alderson 2000). First, according to this theory, learners come to a language classroom with a certain amount of pre-existing schemata. Given the fact the students of this study are northern Thais, they would have been exposed to northern Thailand schemata in one way or another when, for example, eating northern Thai food and hearing about, or visiting, northern Thai tourist attractions. The lesson contents based on northern Thai tourist attractions are thus likely to activate the students' existing northern Thailand schemata, contributing to enhanced motivation, because the lessons developed in this study are meaningful and comprehensible to them. In this regard, the gained knowledge of northern Thailand tourist attractions seems to indicate that the

students' pre-existing schemata of their locality was expanded. Similarly, the increase of the vocabulary test scores suggests that the lessons have equipped the students with a larger vocabulary repertoire to express their locality.

The substantial gains identified in both northern Thainess knowledge and vocabulary knowledge reported in this study are congruent with those from previous studies conducted by Hakim (2015) and Egcas, Tabotabo, and Geroso (2017) in the contexts of Indonesia and the Philippines, respectively. To elaborate, interestingly, both studies focused on the impacts of local context-based lessons in improving Grade 8 students' reading skills. Some of the reading topics included in their local context-based lessons were culture, ways of life, and environment in their respective countries. According to these scholars, the local context-based lessons consisted of topics that the students were familiar with, facilitating the integration of the students' schemata or background knowledge into the reading texts, and thus enhancing their comprehension and motivation. This study, in alignment with the above two studies, highlight the positive impacts of integrating the students' local contexts into the English lessons in expanding their local knowledge and enlarging their vocabulary repertoire relating to their local contexts.

The contents of the lessons that focus on northern Thailand tourist attractions facilitate the task of learning English to a certain extent. This can be compared to a regular classroom setting using commercialised textbooks that tend to be based on native speakers' culture, when young learners may struggle to understand the contents of the lessons (e.g., *snow, Buckingham Palace, and pizza*) while learning the language. In contrast, the lessons containing words like *rain, temple,* and *sticky rice* can be much less cognitively overloading simply because they are words that are closely related to their local contexts. As a result, the students can more easily understand the meanings of these words. It is thus not surprising that the students' posttest scores of the northern Thainess knowledge and vocabulary knowledge were much improved.

Finally, when learning a language, learners are usually busy trying to understand the contents of the lessons whilst also concentrating on the language use. However, in this study, the contents of the lessons are based on tourist attractions in their locality. Due to a certain level of familiarity, the students could devote their full attention to the language – which is vocabulary in this study. In short, with these lessons, the task of learning English vocabulary has become less daunting.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study bears a number of pedagogical implications. First, as demonstrated by this study, local context-based materials or northern Thainess-based lessons can be employed as a means to establish a connection between the learners and their locality. Therefore, English language teachers need to create an opportunity for the students to not only strengthen their local identity but also expand their cultural knowledge.

Second, it is acknowledged that intercultural competence awareness plays a vital role in effective communication. Given that the world we live in nowadays is a big melting pot, intercultural knowledge should be directly and indirectly embraced and forged. However, prior to learners' intercultural competence development, they need to be primarily aware of their own local culture and form their own identity so that it can provide them with a solid foundation to further develop their intercultural competence (Borton 2000, Block 2007, Barkhuizen 2017). The findings generated by this study can thus act as a wake-up call, emphasizing that English language education and national identity are actually no longer two conflicting forces. As demonstrated by this study, these two forces can be compromised and mutually substantiated to both enhance English language learning and maintain national

identity features. Additionally, through exposure to northern Thainess-based English lessons, these young learners are better equipped with the potential to develop their own strategies to maintain their identity as they engage in the English language learning process. Moreover, they are more likely to be successful when exposed to a transition to a new culture or identity situation.

Third, Thainess features encapsulate a number of constructs. As subcategorised in this study, northern Thainess features refer to tourist attractions in northern Thailand, which, in turn, depict a myriad of Thai cultural characteristics including history, arts, and the environment. The lessons developed are thus interdisciplinary in nature. Therefore, the lessons are useful not just to enhance English competence; they can also be adapted to foster the knowledge of other disciplines that help shape the multifaceted identity of individual targeted contexts.

To sum up, this study offers valuable and practical insights into how language learning and pedagogical practice can be enhanced particularly in Thailand. The fallacy that the contents related to native speakers of English in English lessons or instructional materials are appropriate for young learners is being challenged. In conclusion, a much healthier approach to teaching young learners requires that teachers exert their energy, expertise, and confidence in creating their own teaching materials, which can be designed and developed based on the local contexts of the students. Pedagogically, lessons generated using local cultural features are considered to be beneficial, diminishing the disparity or gap between urban and rural learners, because rural learners can directly enjoy and benefit from their local culture. Therefore, learners' cultural features should be integrated into the English curriculum and also receive priority in the continuum of language learning.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDIES

This study is not without its limitations. First, the study has demonstrated that the students appeared to be able to get a good grasp of the meaning of the vocabulary exposed in the lessons. However, no performance assessment has yet been conducted to determine whether they can actually actively use the words learned in productive tasks or put them into practical use in English communication. Given the ultimate goal of any language learning is to be competent in communication, additional studies are needed to make sure that they can use the words learned productively and communicatively. A simulated tour guide task could be an activity to assess whether these young learners can integrate their Thainess and vocabulary knowledge effectively.

This study investigated Thai learners' knowledge (be it Thainess or vocabulary) on a rather short-term basis (8 weeks). It would be interesting to examine how much knowledge of Thainess and vocabulary can be maintained over time. Therefore, further research is needed to examine learners' Thainess and vocabulary knowledge on a long term basis in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of identity and English education in Thailand. Furthermore, additional studies on Thainess-based lessons that would encourage and motivate the students to be actively and authentically engaged in the use of English both inside and outside the classroom are needed.

The context, participants, and lessons of this study focused on northern Thainess, highlighting a group of tourist attractions in the region. Some other northern Thainess features not included in this study might be more relevant to certain learners, for example the dialect, customs and traditions, and way of life. However, given the young age of the students, priority was given to topics that are tangible and concrete. For future studies, particularly with more advanced learners, other areas representing northern Thainess including the northern dialects, customs and traditions might be more challenging. Additionally, some cultural topics might be more appropriate for more advanced students

who are capable of understanding and appreciating abstract concepts without great difficulty. Since the sustainment of Thainess is of national concern, studies relating to the construction of English instructional innovations integrating the cultural features of other regions in Thailand would allow English language learners across the entire educational paradigm and across the whole country to be able to effectively communicate about national Thainess. At this juncture, English language competence and Thainess awareness can be concurrently developed.

CONCLUSION

English hegemony and English language education effectiveness in Thailand has been challenged. One of the concerns arises from the use of commercial textbooks that tend to focus on the target language culture (which bears very little relation to Thai learners' local contexts) and thus undermine the local knowledge and cultural values of the language learners. In order to respond to the needs of the country, this study calls for local context-based lessons that can engage the students and, at the same time, maintain and reinforce their local identity. In this research, a series of English lessons was constructed, as well as corresponding Thainess and English vocabulary pretests and posttests. Initially, the Thainess and vocabulary pretests were administered. Then, the set of English lessons was implemented in four classes of Grade 4 students in four different northern provinces. Towards the end of the implementation, the posttests of Thainess and vocabulary were administered. The comparison of Thainess and vocabulary pretest and posttest scores revealed that the posttest scores were significantly higher than the corresponding pretest scores, indicating the positive impacts of the northern Thainess-based materials. Through the exposure to the set of lessons, the learners seem to be able to make connections with familiar local cultural features. This study has proved that the hegemony of the English language does not necessarily undermine the nationalistic construction of the Thai identity but can be manipulated and embraced as a tool to support and strengthen Thailand's national and cultural identity, in addition to fostering English language skills. As demonstrated, knowledge of both the English language and Thai identity can be mutually beneficial, creating quality Thai citizens and hopefully successful global citizens for the international community.

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