

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE REALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH FOR THE FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

Van Thi Quynh Hoa*, Nguyen Quynh Duong
University of Agriculture and Forestry - TNU

ABSTRACT

This study attempted to investigate how English is taught and learnt for the first year students in Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAf) including the teachers' professional knowledge, the conditions of teaching and learning English, opportunities for students to use English outside classroom, opportunities for teachers' professional development, and to offer some suggestions for improving teaching and learning English in TUAf. The subjects of this study were 200 students and 6 teachers at TUAf. To achieve the aims of the study, a quantitative questionnaire was used to collect the needed data. The findings show that majority of the teachers have quite good theoretical professional knowledge. Teaching condition is quite good. Some students express their positive attitudes to English learning, but they had too little exposure to English language outside classroom.

Keywords: *teaching and learning English, first year students, Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry.*

INTRODUCTION

In the education sector, despite the presence of other popular foreign languages in Vietnam today, English is considered the most important foreign language in colleges and universities (Nguyen, 2002).

Teaching and learning are the two main processes in any classroom practice, theories and approaches all seem to support the ideas of making use of technology to increase the effectiveness of teaching (Le Thao & Le Quynh, 2012) and empowering students in their learning process. However, we may have all known that every teaching situation is different and every language learning process in the classroom is different. Moreover, there is always a big gap between language teaching and learning students do not always learn everything they are taught.

There is also a popular claim among researchers and employers about the weak English skills of the majority university students (Nunan, 2003; Tran Ngoc Ca, 2006). In order to study English as a foreign language and be successful at it, the students

must be helped by the teacher to acquire skills in the four language art skills, namely: speaking, listening, writing, and reading. This study was aimed to find out the English teaching and learning facts in TUAf. Also, it is expected that this study will be referred to as evidence to the necessity in improving those facts.

SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study were 200 students and 6 teachers at TUAf. They were selected at random to participate in this study. The activities carried out were according to the course syllabus of Basic English I, II. To achieve the aims of the study, a quantitative questionnaire was used to collect the needed data.

FINDINGS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' questionnaire

Students' attitudes and motivation to learn English

In the questionnaire, there are three questions designed to explore students' motivation and attitudes to learn English. The frequencies of participants' reasons were quantitatively analyzed by counting the occurrences of their choice. The result is presented in Table 1 below:

* Tel: 0982 068949; Email: vanthiquynhhoa@tuaf.edu.vn

Table 1: *Students' reasons for learning English.*
(N= 200)

Reasons for learning English	Number of respondents (%)
Interests in English	15
Communicate in English	14
Need for future career	20
Pass the exams	18
A compulsory subject	31
Others	0

The result from Table 1 showed that many students in TUA for gifted students were aware of benefits of learning English. However, the portion of 19.5% of students said they learned English to pass the exam and 31% said it was a compulsory subject revealed that a greater number of students were not really motivated in learning English. Moreover, in regard to the importance of getting good mark in class (Q3), it is interesting to find out that more than half of the respondents (51%) revealed that good mark was their goal in learning English. The results of the responses are presented in the table 2 below:

Table 2: *Students' responses to the importance of good marks in class (N=200)*

The importance of good marks	Agree (%)
Very important	51%
Just to have a pass mark	24%
Don't care	25%

Table 4: *Students' access to resources (N=200)*

How often	Usually %	Sometimes %	Rarely %	Never %
Do you read books or newspapers in English?	0.8	17	34	48
Do your teachers of English use a tape recorder to teach you listening?	0	6	15	79
Do you learn English in a language laboratory?	0	0	0	0

79% of respondents said that the teachers had never used tape recorder to teach them English in class and 100% commented that they had never had an English lesson in the language laboratory. The findings indicated that teaching listening was not regarded as an important part in teaching English. Furthermore, 34% of students rarely read books and newspapers in English and 48% never, confirmed that the students learned English in a very simple way.

Question 7 in the questionnaire was designed to find out the answer to the question. A majority of students selected workbooks (50%), grammar and reference books (54%). Some chose English magazines and newspapers, others chose the Internet. Nevertheless, 7% of the students said that

Participants' attitudes to English language learning are the aims of the next two questions. Many of them revealed that they found the English lessons necessary (29%) and interesting (18%). However, the number of students who have negative attitude towards learning English raised a considerable concern. Some of them revealed that the English lessons were boring (16%) and time wasting (1.5%). In addition to that, many of the participants (26%) said that the lessons were difficult for them. 2.5% of them said that the lessons were remote from their real life and 6% have no idea. (See table 3).

Table 3: *Students' attitudes towards English lessons*

Attitudes to English lessons	Number of respondents (%)
Boring	16
Waste of time	1.5
Necessary	29
Interesting	18
Difficult	26
Easy	1
Unrealistic	2.5
No idea	6

Students' access to resources

The next four questions (Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7) attempt to find out to which extend other materials are used by students and teachers beside textbooks to improve their language learning. Table 4 is the summary of the results of responses to the questions with students:

they never used any materials except the textbooks. It can be seen that they mainly focused on developing their reading skill and grammar exercises. This correlates with the reasons they chose to learn English-to pass the exams.

Opportunities to use English outside classroom

The results showed that students had too little exposure to the language they learned outside their class. 46% of the students revealed that they rarely had opportunities to speak English to English speaking people and 38% said never.

Table 6: *Students' opportunities to speak English to English speaking people. N=200*

Number of respondents	Usually %	Sometimes %	Rarely %	Never %
200	2	14	46	38

Teachers' questionnaire

Teachers' professional knowledge

The first 12 questions in the questionnaire were designed to measure the teachers' professional knowledge. Question 1 and 2 attempt to find out the aim of teaching English as identified by the teachers of the university. The results of the question 1 are presented in the table below:

Table 7: *Teachers' views on the aims of teaching English. N=6*

The aims of teaching English is to enable the students to	Number of respondents %
Have simple conversation in English with other English speaking people	50
Read simple texts in English	83
Write personal letter to friends	50
Study in English speaking country	33
Understand English grammar and do grammar exercises	83
Acquire a certain amount of vocabulary	83
Do well in exams	16
Understand more about English	16

Findings from question 2 confirm the discussion above. Table 8 presents the results of this question.

Table 8: *Teachers' opinion about the aspect of language taught at TUAF*

Aspects of language	T 1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	Total
Grammar	3	3	4	3	1	1	15
Vocabulary	2	2	5	4	3	2	18
Pronunciation	1	1	6	7	4	3	22
Writing	8	7	7	5	8	7	42
Listening	4	8	8	6	7	8	41
Extensive reading	6	5	2	8	5	6	32
Intensive reading	5	4	3	2	6	5	25
Conversational skill	7	6	1	1	2	4	21

The table 9 showed the data of these questions taken from the questionnaire.

Only 2% said they usually spoke English to English speaking people (see table 6).

Table 5: *Summary of responses to students' material using. N=200*

Learning resources used	Number of respondents (%)
Workbooks	50
Grammar and reference books	54
Newspapers and magazines	6
The Internet	22
Others:- Nothing	7

Table 9: *Teachers' beliefs in teaching and learning. N=6*

Beliefs	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
Grammar is a worthwhile component for any language curriculum?	17	66	17	0
Listening, speaking, writing and reading skills should be taught separately?	33	17	33	17
Students always learn more from their teachers than they learn by themselves?	0	83	17	0
Learners should not be allowed to make errors and any errors have to be corrected immediately?	0	17	66	17
It is important to repeat and practice a lot in learning a foreign language?	66	34	0	0

Table 10: *Teachers' awareness about the important of factors affecting language learning*

Factors affecting language learning	Very important %	Important %	Not very important %	Not very important at all
Intelligence	17	67	17	0
Aptitude	50	50	0	0
Personality	17	67	0	17
Motivation	33	67	0	0
Learning strategies	67	0	33	0
Learner belief	67	17	0	17
Age	0	17	67	17

Question 5 attempts to find out teachers' opinion on how to teach listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The findings show that they have quite different perception about this problem. 2 participants out of 6 strongly agreed that these skills should be taught separately, one selected "agree" while other two disagreed and one strongly disagreed. This revealed 50% of the participants did not realize the necessity of integrating skills in language teaching.

The results from question 6 showed that 83% of the respondents agreed that students always learned more from their teachers than by themselves. Only one chose "disagreed". Obviously, students cannot learn the language if they are not taught.

Question 7 referred the teachers' evaluation of students' mistakes. 4 participants out of 6 said that they disagreed, one said strongly disagreed, only one agreed that learners should not be allowed to make mistakes and any mistakes has to be corrected immediately.

Thus, mistakes correction has to be varied according to the specific characteristics of the students.

In regard to the role of practice in learning a language, 67% of the participants strongly agreed that it is important to repeat and practice a lot in learning a foreign language and 33% said they disagreed. The participants revealed that practice plays a very important role in their teaching.

The 10 question is intended to find out which factor among "the teacher", "the learners" and "the teaching material play the most important role in the classroom. The results showed that most of the participants (67%) are learner-centered which is in favor language teaching methodology now. A small percentage (33%) said that the teacher is the most decisive factor in the classroom.

Assessing teachers' awareness of how the factors such as intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation, learner preferences and age influence foreign language learning,

the result of question 11 indicated that most of the respondents revealed that they saw the important role of the following factors as showed in the table 10.

In order to find out which classroom techniques could help the teachers most to bring about effective teaching, question 12 was included in the questionnaire. The techniques chosen by most of the respondents were using blackboard and organizing group work and pair work (100%).

Materials are closely related to teachers and learners. They play a very important role in teaching and learning. As the results of the question 13 showed, 33 % of the respondents said that they were not satisfied with the textbooks. 100% of the participants revealed that they used other materials beside the textbooks in their teaching. It is obvious that the respondents had tried quite hard to make the lessons more interesting and effective using different sources of materials.

Question 16 attempts to find out the way the participant use the textbooks they are teaching. 50% of the participants said that they designed new exercises, 17% simplified the exercises or activities if necessary. It showed that the teachers in TUAF have been aware of the necessity of adapting textbooks in their teaching. However, there is a percentage of 33% just taught everything in the textbooks.

Opportunities for teachers' professional development

The results of question 18 showed that the respondents mainly shared their teaching experience with their colleagues. Using the Internet is another way which was used by most of the respondents to improve their teaching.

Question 19 attempted to find out if the respondents had opportunities to take part in workshops on language teaching methodology. 5 teachers out of 6 said that they had participated in workshops.

The last question is an open question. It attempted to find out the respondents' ideas about the effectiveness of the workshops. 3 of them said that the workshops were quite effective. 2 of them had no idea about the workshops. Clearly, the respondents revealed the effectiveness of the workshops but it would be better if they lasted longer and were organized more frequently.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The teachers were carefully selected and they have high qualifications. Therefore, majority of them have quite good theoretical professional knowledge.

Teaching condition is quite good, the university has a language laboratory, with cassettes, many computers, and a library with different supplementary materials. Most of them have participated in conferences or workshops on language teaching methodology.

Some students express their positive attitudes to English learning. In general, they are not quite satisfied with the lessons provided by the teachers, especially the topics, and the techniques to motivate them in learning. The students had too little exposure to English language outside classroom.

Recommendations

The important implication for the teacher is to vary their techniques and activities so as to involve more students in the lesson and to reduce the boredom of the lesson. The learning environment also plays an important part. Besides, the teacher's behavior is a decisive factor to increase students' motivation.

It is necessary for teachers to provide out-of-class activities. This can be achieved by organizing extra activities in English speaking. These activities are advantages to learning because these provides necessary language environment for language use. The topics should be practical, updated and

interesting to learners. Various and relevant kinds of exercises should be added.

In order to help teachers do an effective job of teaching, conducting effective professional development activities is really crucial. It is highly recommended that authorities and policy makers should give a special priority to help the teachers in mountainous areas so that they can participate informal language teaching training courses to have opportunities to develop their professional growth and advancement.

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TÓM TẮT

ĐIỀU TRA THỰC TRẠNG DẠY VÀ HỌC TIẾNG ANH CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NÔNG LÂM – ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

Văn Thị Quỳnh Hoa*, Nguyễn Quỳnh Dương
Trường Đại học Nông Lâm – ĐH Thái Nguyên

Nghiên cứu này điều tra việc dạy và học tiếng Anh cho sinh viên năm thứ nhất tại trường Đại học Nông Lâm Thái Nguyên bao gồm kiến thức chuyên môn của giáo viên và phương pháp giảng dạy, các điều kiện dạy và học tiếng Anh, cơ hội sử dụng tiếng Anh ngoài lớp học của sinh viên, cơ hội phát triển chuyên môn của giáo viên, và một số gợi ý để nâng cao việc dạy và học tiếng Anh cho sinh viên. Đối tượng của nghiên cứu này là 200 sinh viên và 6 giáo viên. Để đạt được mục tiêu của nghiên cứu này, một bảng câu hỏi định lượng được sử dụng để thu thập các dữ liệu cần thiết. Kết quả cho thấy đa số giáo viên có kiến thức chuyên môn tốt, điều kiện giảng dạy tốt, một số sinh viên bày tỏ thái độ tích cực trong việc học tiếng Anh và sinh viên có ít cơ hội sử dụng tiếng Anh ngoài khóa.

Từ khóa: học và dạy tiếng Anh, sinh viên năm thứ nhất, trường Đại học Nông Lâm Thái Nguyên

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* Tel: 0982 068949; Email: vanthiquynhhoa@tuaf.edu.vn