

APPROACHES TO IMPROVE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY FOR LAO STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION – VIETNAM

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Abstract

The research is aimed to make statistics and description of the number and characteristics of Lao students studying at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA) in Thai Nguyen City of Vietnam, then to describe and analyze their progress of learning results of English courses over the last three years and finally, from the analysis and synthesis results, some suggestions and measures to improve their English language proficiency have been proposed in detail. A mixed research design using two questionnaires and dozens of in-depth interviews with Lao students and lecturers of English at TUEBA were employed for achieving the objectives of the research. Results found out six core difficulties of Lao students in learning English and suggested seven possible solutions to improving their English proficiency for communication purposes at TUEBA. The research has significantly contributed to improving the quality of English training in the university; thereby improving the university's ability and efficiency of recruiting Lao students in particular and international students in general.

Keywords: *English proficiency, communication purposes, Lao students, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA).*

INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, in recent years, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) has sent many students to study at Vietnam's universities, requiring Lao students to master both languages of English and Vietnamese. Most of the current research is focused on improving the quality of teaching Vietnamese to Lao students as a foreign language such as Russian, N. T. (2013); Khuong, L. Q. (2017); Nghi, T. Q. D. (2020). However, studies on improving or improving English ability for Lao students are almost absent and have not been focused on, while the reality of teaching and learning English of Lao students to complete the required courses is not yet available. The English courses required in the training program framework of the Ministry of Education are facing many difficulties and need urgent support and solutions.

Research works on improving English ability for Lao students mainly take place in Laos such as Souriyavongsa, T., Abidin, M. J. Z., Sam, R., Mei, L. L., & Aloysius, I. B. (2013); Souriyavongsa, T., Rany, S., Abidin, M. J. Z., & Mei, L. L. (2013); Vongxay, H. (2013). Some typical research works on improving English ability for Asian students such as Nguyen, C. T. (2011).

However, specific research on improving English ability for Lao students in Vietnam is still very rare such as GIANG, B. T. K., & VAN TUAN, V. U. (2017). The article mentions the benefits of allowing transcoding in the classroom where Lao students learn English at universities in Vietnam as an effective approach to improve the English proficiency of Lao students. However, the empirical evidence for this method is still too small to achieve the desired reliability.

Although Lao students have only completed 9 months of the Vietnamese preparatory program, which is equivalent to Vietnamese ability at B1 level, Lao students have started their bachelor's program like other Vietnamese students. This is a great difficulty for Lao students because they have to practice and improve their Vietnamese language, study a professional major, and at the same time have to complete 5-6 English courses in the training program. Moreover, the implementation of teaching and learning English at the school is now in a massive form, meaning that the class size is about 60 students from different countries such as Vietnam, Laos, China and the Philippines, with more than 90% are Vietnamese students. Since the language of instruction for the mass English modules in the training program is English and Vietnamese, learning a new language (English) on the basis of another language (Vietnamese) other than Lao students' mother tongue is one of the difficulties that need to be taken care of and solved.

With the number of 29 Lao students studying at TUEBA, mainly K14 – K17, most students have difficulty listening to lectures conducted in English and explaining words, phrases, and grammar in Vietnamese. Therefore, the English ability of Lao students at TUEBA, especially the two key communicative skills of listening and speaking, is still low and need improvement.

Through exchanges, conversations, interviews, exam questions, and the process of teaching and learning in the lecture hall, the research team, who also is a group of English teachers, has grasped the practical difficulties of Lao students in learning English, the group discussed, researched and proposed the topic "Improving English proficiency for Lao students at the University of Economics and Business. Business Administration – Thai Nguyen University"

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research is aimed to make statistics and description of the number and characteristics of Lao students studying at TUEBA including input English level, input Vietnamese level, history of language learnings, English learning habits, current key difficulties in English learning.

The second objective of this project is to describe and analyze the progress of learning results of English courses of Lao students at TUEBA over the last three years.

From the above analysis and synthesis results, some suggestions and measures to improve English language ability for Lao students at TUEBA have been proposed in detail.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods included reviewing literature from domestic and foreign studies; Descriptive statistics of Lao students studying at TUEBA using a questionnaire; A questionnaire and dozens of in-depth interviews with 16 lecturers from the Division of Foreign Languages; Synthesize, analyze, present and interpret English scores of Lao students from K14 to K17; In-depth interviews with Lao students from K14 to K17 in order to find out the core difficulties of Lao students in learning English using Vietnamese language instructions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1. Characteristics of Lao students studying at University of Economics and Business Administration - Thai Nguyen University

The total number of Lao students living and studying in the university dormitory is 29 students, including 15 females and 14 males. The total number of students participating in the survey was 25, accounting for 86% of the total population. Thus, the survey on this sample population was considered to be representative of the whole population.

Lao students at TUEBA come from more than 20 different provinces of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, including the capital Vientiane.

Lao students are studying at TUEBA from K14 to K17, in which the largest number is K16 students (40%), followed by K17 (32%), then K14 (16%) and the lowest K15 (12%).

The majority of Lao students (60%) are studying Banking - Finance at TUEBA, the number of Lao students studying economics, business administration, commercial marketing and tourism accounts for the same proportion (12%), the number of Lao students studying accounting is the lowest making up 4%.

Up to 40% of Lao students have been in Vietnam for 4 years, especially more than 20% of them have been in Vietnam for 5 years or more, only 1% of Lao students have been in Vietnam for 1 year.

2. Progression of English ability of Lao students through the process of studying English courses in the current training program

Up to 96% of Lao students in TUEBA have studied English in Laos in their general education program before going to Vietnam to study at TUEBA. 24% of Lao students study English from 7 to 12 years; 20% of Lao students study English for 4 to 6 years, 40% of Lao students study English for 1 to 3 years. However, the input English ability of Lao students is generally at a low average level, as shown by the following survey data:

2.1. Results of the survey on English proficiency of Lao students

In terms of communication ability, 44% of Lao students can speak out 10 to 19 sentences, equivalent to a pre-A1 level according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), 16% cannot speak anything at all, or can speak very little or speak very few sentences, only 40% are equivalent to the pre-A2 entry-level, who are able to speak more than 20 English sentences. Through this survey, it shows that the input English ability of Lao students in terms of speaking ability is at an average level, and the level ranges from A0 to pre-A2 level (according to CEFR).

Regarding reading comprehension ability, given a passage of about 300-400 words as in the Life curriculum, 60% of Lao students have the ability to read and understand, the remaining 40% of Lao students do not understand or especially there is one surveyed student who never reads any texts in the coursebook.

In terms of listening ability, 68% of Lao students can understand the lecture of the English teachers in class; the remaining 32% of Lao students listen to teachers carefully but do not understand at all.

Regarding writing ability, 64% of Lao students in the survey are able to write simple sentences, 32% can write short paragraphs of 25-35 words, 28% can write compound and complex sentences, 24% can write short paragraphs of 35 up to 45 words, 20% can write a letter and a story with a length of about 100 words; only 4% could not write any English sentences.

Regarding vocabulary, up to 36% of Lao students participating in the survey own less than 100 words, 28% can memorize about 100-500 words, 16% can memorize more than 500 words, but no student owns more than 1.000 words.

Regarding English grammar, 60% of Lao students participating in the survey understand 3 basic tenses in English: Past, Present, Future; 28% can arrange the word order in a single sentence; 24% can distinguish subjects from verbs and objects; 20% can identify parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs and can distinguish among affirmative, negative and interrogative forms; Only 16% can find out the differences among simple, compound and complex sentences and merely 8% can arrange word order in the compound and complex sentences.

Regarding English pronunciation, 36% of surveyed Lao students can recognize word stress, 28% know how to connect sounds in phrases and sentences, 24% know how to pronounce International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), 20% know how to use intonation in English, only 12% know how to pronounce the word properly, clearly and correctly, and 12% are unsure or do not know how to pronounce a simple word.

2.2. The results of the survey of English language proficiency of Lao students were observed and commented on by the lecturers of the Department of Foreign Languages.

According to observations and comments of 16 lecturers of the Foreign Language Division who have been directly teaching and evaluating Lao students in all 5-6 compulsory English courses, 75% of Lao students have English proficiency at an average level, the number of excellent, good and weak students accounts for a small percentage, around 10%. This result is similar to the survey results obtained from a sample of 25 Lao students.

2.3. The progress of Lao students' ability through English courses at TUEBA is as follows:

72% of Lao students participating in the survey have completed English Course #1 at TUEBA with the result of 13.6% achieving A level; 31.8% achieved level B; 27.3% achieved C level; 4.5% achieved level D; In particular, no student has to repeat this course.

84% of Lao students participating in the survey have completed English Course #2 at TUEBA with the result of 22.7% reaching A level; 31.8% achieved level B; 22.7% achieved C level; 4.5% achieved D level; In particular, no student has to repeat this course.

7/25 Lao students participating in the survey have completed English Course #3 at TUEBA with the result that 4 students achieved B; 1 gained level C; 1 is studying; 1 studied but no score yet.

Six out of twenty five Lao students participating in the survey have completed English Course #4 at TUEBA with the result that 2 students achieved B; 3 reached C level; 1 is studying;

Six out of twenty five Lao students participating in the survey have completed English Course #5 at TUEBA with the result that 2 students achieved A level; 3 reached level B; 1 got C level

Six out of twenty five Lao students participating in the survey have completed English Course #6 at TUEBA with the result that 1 student achieved A level; 3 reached level B; 1 gained level C; 1 could not remember his score.

It is common for Lao students to achieve English proficiency at B and C levels. The results show that the number of Lao students achieving B level is increasing in recent courses.

3. Core difficulties of Lao students in learning English

Firstly, Lao students lack the motivation to study English, still 16% of Lao students have not found the motivation to learn English.

Secondly, the attitude of Lao students to study English was still passive, still up to 40% of Lao students learned English for confrontation only. This result was similar to the survey results of teachers in the foreign language division of the school. According to observations and comments of 16 lecturers of the Foreign Language Division, 43.8% of Lao students had a passive learning attitude towards English courses.

Thirdly, up to 80% of Lao students surveyed found that they were still very weak in listening and speaking skills. This result coincided with 68.8% of observations and comments of the teachers of the TUEBA foreign language division about the weakness of the English listening and speaking skills of Lao students. Since the background of lexical resources and basic grammar of Lao students was still low, so the vast majority of 70% of Lao students found themselves lacking vocabulary, spelling mistakes, and common grammar mistakes; as a result, readers could not understand or misunderstand what they had written. Up to 75% of Lao students pronounce basic words wrongly, so when they spoke out, listeners could not understand what they had said. Accordingly, the purpose of the communication was not achieved, leading to loss of confidence in communication, and ultimately falling into the hesitation or daring not to communicate and completely losing the ability to communicate in English.

Fourth, still 16% of Lao students did not have the consciousness, attitude and behaviour to self-study English; there are still 4% of Lao students who did not study English, as shown by just sitting in class but not studying; or/ and did not do English homework. Due to limited class time, if students did not do their homework or study outside of class, it was extremely difficult to improve their proficiency.

Fifth, outside of class time, 52% of Lao students did not participate in English-related activities such as TUEBA's English Club, English Olympic competitions, or English speeches contests, English summer camping trip, etc. due to lacking active access to the opportunities to join these available activities at school at least.

Sixth, there was a difference between the final exam scores of the Lao students and the Grade Point Average (GPA) of the English courses of Lao students. This suggests that the actual and recent English proficiency of Lao students is lower than the one shown on the GPA scores.

SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Teaching and learning English for Lao students is communication-oriented, for communication purposes and personalized to each Lao student.

First, although the current number of Lao students in TUEBA is not big, about 30 students, Lao students are quite diverse in terms of basic English background, English learning purposes, English learning interests, English learning habits, etc. Therefore, individualizing English teaching and learning for Lao students at TUEBA should be considered, implemented and tested.

The research team proposes to fully utilize the strengths of information technology in personalizing foreign language teaching and learning to achieve optimal efficiency without increasing the cost of mass training.

Second, the key point to improve Lao students' English skills is to create their learning motivation through a variety of activities such as:

- Teaching English should be accompanied with the analysis of the competitive advantage prospects of Lao students after graduation in the global labour market if they could master English, Vietnamese and Lao languages
- Lao students are encouraged to join English clubs at schools and regional universities, which can create an environment for Lao students to develop English communication skills, Vietnamese communication skills, and communication skills in an international environment.
- Lao students are encouraged to participate in practical activities using English and Vietnamese such as picnics, community exchanges, and experiences of Vietnamese culture and traditions for international students on special occasions with the guidance and help of Vietnamese lecturers and students. Through games and international cultural exchanges, Lao students could increase their ability to communicate in English and Vietnamese more naturally and effectively.
- In particular, it is proposed that the school/youth union could establish a number of free community study groups including 01 Vietnamese students, 03 Laotian students and 01 Filipino/or student from the English speaking countries to help Lao students improve their English ability in the most effective and exciting way. Community English learning groups can take place online or face-to-face depending on the actual conditions.

Third, it is proposed to improve self-study and active learning skills for Lao students by such various ways as encouraging them to complete assignments on time, preparing lessons before class, and encouraging them to ask questions in the learning process, encouraging them to increase interaction with lecturers, Vietnamese students as well as other international students, supporting them to practice active learning skills such as self ask - self answer – impossible to self answer – ask a friend – ask another friend – discuss in a group of friends with the support of searching engines like Google – ask teachers.

Fourth, the research team proposed that the school have a policy of giving priority to emulation, commending and rewarding the English courses achievements of Lao students to motivate and encourage them to improve their English skills.

Fifth, 100% of the lecturers of the Division of Foreign Languages have used a combination of both English and Vietnamese in the process of teaching English courses, and 100% of Lao students love that way of teaching. Therefore, in order to improve the effectiveness of English teaching and learning for Lao students, a basic requirement is that Lao students need to understand Vietnamese and be good at Vietnamese first. Therefore, the research team suggests that the school should extend the time for Vietnamese students to study Vietnamese before they can officially enrol on the BA academic programs at TUEBA. In fact, at the moment the duration of Lao students' Vietnamese training is only 9 months, which is considered to be too short, thus by extending 6 months more is recommended to equip Lao students with a better language background to comprehend English lectures later with using Vietnamese as an instructional language.

Sixth, up to 43% of lecturers in the Department of Foreign Languages advised to change the way of testing to properly assess the ability of Lao students and at the same time create motivation for them to improve their English ability; It is advised to change into oral exam format to improve English communication ability as well as to reform the form of exam questions in the direction of open-ended questions to encourage the initiative and creativity of Lao students. Some methods of testing and assessment are more suitable for Lao students such as: Accepting recording English speaking videos by topics or video recording of English community group activities for the Participation and Midterm grading criteria of the English courses.

Seventh, 100% of lecturers of the Foreign Language Division were very interested in international students in general and Lao students in particular. However, at present, the interest in helping Lao students has only been done quite meagerly, such as 68.8% of lecturers regularly calling Lao students to speak, providing additional documents when required by Lao students, using relations and comparisons about British - American - Vietnamese - Laotian cultures related to the lesson. Therefore, it is suggested that the lecturers should allow Lao students to record the lecture so that the students could listen again after the lesson. If the student still had problems, the lecturer could give private tutorials to them. To do this effectively, the research team recommends the school that the school should support teachers who teach classes with Lao students with appropriate incentive policy due to the recent survey results that 50% of the lecturers of the Foreign Language Division feel very happy when more Lao students enrol at TUEBA but feel normal when teaching classes with the participation of Lao students.

CONCLUSION

Vietnam and Laos are two neighbouring countries, with a long tradition of solidarity, friendship and special cooperation. The Party and the Government of the two countries have always paid special attention to cooperation in many fields, especially in the field of Education and Training. Implementing the policy of The Party and the Government on cooperation in training human resources for Laos, TUEBA has organized specialized training for Lao students and initially achieved many goals with positive results. Besides the successes that the school has achieved, there are still some limitations in teaching and learning English on the Vietnamese language platform. Hopefully, the solutions proposed by the authors above, if applied, the English training for international students in general and Lao students in particular will be effective.

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