

English in Higher Education Context: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Thailand Students

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English grows fast in Southeast Asia due to the importance of it as the language of modernization and international communication. Thailand and Indonesia are both located in Southeast Asia with their own national language, Thai and Bahasa Indonesia and thus English in both countries functions as a foreign language. This research tries to reveal English in higher education context by focusing on university students' perception on English. The respondents of this research are the student of Jenderal Soedirman University and Burapha University It investigated 120 students consisting 30 male Indonesia students, 30 female Indonesia students, 30 male Thailand students, and 30 female Thailand students. Several aspects are investigated to capture students' perception based on the following aspects (1) students perception on English as a compulsory subject, (2) students' preference on their English teacher, (3) English hour in university, (4) the level of difficulties of English features, and (5) students' preferable ways to improve their English.

Keywords: perception, higher education context, foreign language, national language, Southeast Asia

Perkembangan pesat Bahasa Inggris di kawasan Asia Tenggara dipicu oleh keberadaan bahasa itu sebagai bahasa komunikasi internasional dan bahasa modernisasi. Thailand dan Indonesia yang berada di kawasan Asia Tenggara memiliki bahasa nasional yaitu Thai dan Bahasa Indonesia sehingga Bahasa Inggris di kedua negara tersebut berfungsi sebagai bahasa asing. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan persepsi siswa terhadap Bahasa Inggris dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi dengan menggunakan responden dari Universitas Burapha dan Universitas Jenderal Soedirman. Responden berjumlah 120 mahasiswa yang terdiri dari 30 mahasiswa laki-laki dari Thailand, 30 mahasiswa

perempuand dari Thailand, 30 mahasiswa laki-laki dari Indonesia, dan 30 mahasiswa perempuan dari Indonesia. Aspek yang dikaji dalam penelitian ini adalah sebagai berikut (1) persepsi mahasiswa terhadap Bahasa Inggris sebagai mata kuliah wajib, (2) preferensi mahasiswa terhadap guru Bahasa Inggris, (3) Jam pelajaran Bahasa Inggris di universitas, (4) tingkat kesulitan dalam fitur Bahasa Inggris, dan (5) preferensi mahasiswa terhadap cara belajar Bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: persepsi, konteks pendidikan tinggi, bahasa asing, bahasa nasional, Asia Tenggara

1. Introduction

English is one of many European languages which is widely spoken across the globe and so is in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, a term used since World War II, is an area geographically situated east of the Indian subcontinent, south of China, west of New Guinea and north of Australia, between the Indian Ocean in the west and the Pacific Ocean in the east. The region spreads over 4,506,600 km², which is made up of two distinct regions, the mainland peninsula, and an island or maritime zone. The mainland which is an extension of the Asian continent includes Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Island or maritime Southeast Asia comprises Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, and the new nation of East Timor, formerly part of Indonesia (Harne, 2009). He further explains that around 620 million inhabitants make Southeast Asia one of the most populated regions in the world. A 2005 survey shows that among the 11 countries, Brunei had the smallest population with 0.4 million people, followed by East Timor with 0.9 million while Indonesia had the biggest population, with 221.9 million (Harne, 2009).

English in Southeast Asia is used either as the second language or the foreign language. Crystal (2003) reports that more and more users of English today are either bilingual or multilingual. Southeast Asia is the home for many indigenous languages, thus, it is very common for Southeast Asian people to speak more than two or three languages. He further explains that the present-day world status of English is primarily the result of two key factors: the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century; and the growing economic, military and political dominance of the United States in the twentieth century. It is the latter factor which lies behind the world position of the English language today (Crystal, 2003: 59).

Indonesia and Thailand are two countries in Southeast Asia that use English as their foreign language. English becomes a subject in formal school and it is still taught in University. Besides the use of English in university level, other similarity between Indonesia and Thailand is that both countries have their own national languages, Bahasa Indonesia and Thai. Despite those similarities, English in higher education in Indonesia and Thailand have some differences. This article tries to reveal the comparison of the use of English in higher education context in Thailand and Indonesia.

2. Methodology

This research belongs to descriptive quantitative since it tries to describe a phenomenon by utilizing quantitative data. Cresswell (1994) mentions that a qualitative research is an exploratory research where the researcher explores a single entity or phenomenon (the case) bounded by time and activity and collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time. It tries to portrait the comparison between Indonesia and Thailand students on the use of English in higher education context by comparing several aspects such as (1) students perception on English as a compulsory subject, (2) students' preference on their English teacher, (3) English hour in university, (4) the level of difficulties of English features, and (5) students' preferable ways to improve their English.

The respondents of this research are 120 students consisting 30 female Indonesia students, 30 male Indonesia students, 30 female Thai students and 30 male Thai students. Data is gathered by using questionnaire. Questionnaire is a preferable way in collecting abundant data in limited time even though there are many techniques used to collect data that include interviews, telephone calls, and observation (Tharenou, Danohue & Cooper, 2007).

3. Findings and Discussion

This part mainly talks about the findings and discussion of the research. As it has previously mentioned, it talks about (1) students perception on English as a compulsory subject, (2) students' preference on their English teacher, (3) English hour in university, (4) the level of difficulties of English features, and (5) students' preferable ways to improve their English.

3.1 Students perception on English as a compulsory subject

Knowing students' perception whether or not they support the policy on English as a compulsory subject in university context is also important to measure their awareness of the importance of English in higher education context. To know whether or not students support the policy to make English as a compulsory subject, this research tries to gather their opinion. It seems that students support the policy to make English as a compulsory subject as it is shown by table 1. Table 1 displays the distribution of students' opinion on English as a compulsory subject in a university.

Table 1. Students perception on English as a compulsory subject

No	Students' Perception	Thailand		Indonesia	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
1	Yes	29	29	29	29
2	No	1	1	-	1
3	Cannot say either	-	-	1	-
Total		30	30	30	30

Out of 120 students, 116 (96%) students which consist of 29 male Thailand students, 29 female Thailand students, 29 male Indonesian students, 29 female Indonesian students support the idea of English as a compulsory subject in a university. Only 3 students (2.5%) think that English is not further needed as a compulsory subject in higher education contest. Those three students consist of 1 male Thailand student, 1 female Thailand student, and 1 male Indonesian student. Only 1 male Indonesian student cannot give his opinion on English as a compulsory subject in university context.

From this finding, it can be seen that most of respondents think that English is important and they still need it in higher education context. English becomes the language of modernization in which most of science, knowledge, culture and information are transferred by using English. Despite the fact that both countries have their own national language, Thai and Bahasa Indonesia, respondents still think that English is important in higher education context because of its function as the language of modernization and the language of international communication. They also realize that English is also important even though it also threatens the existence of the indigenous languages (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

3.2 Students' preference on their English teacher

Teachers or language instructors play important role in teaching and learning process. They may encourage students to achieve more and to learn more. Choosing language instructor/teacher needs a thorough consideration. In this research, native and nonnative English teacher is chosen as an option in selecting a teacher. The data reveals that most students prefer native English teacher to teach them in university, however, there is a sharp differences between Thailand and Indonesian students as it can be seen in table 2. Table 2 shows the distribution of students' preferences on their English teacher.

Table2. Distribution of Students' Preference on Their English Teacher

No	English Teacher	Thailand		Indonesia	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
1	Native	28	29	16	12
2	Nonnative	2	1	14	18
Total		30	30	30	30

There are 85 students (70.8%) who state that they prefer to have native English teacher than to have nonnative English teacher. They consist of 28 male Thailand students, 29 female Thailand students, 16 male Indonesian students, and 12 female Indonesian students. There are 35 students (29.2%) who like to have nonnative English teacher. They are 2 male Thailand students, 1 female Thailand student, 14 male Indonesian students, and 18 female Indonesian students.

Dealing with nonnative English teacher, there is a severe difference between Thailand and Indonesian students. Compare to Thailand students, there is a tendency that Indonesian students

prefer to have nonnative teacher as they support to have nonnative English teacher (32 students) and in Thailand there are only 3 students who prefer to have nonnative teacher.

Nonnative English teacher/instructor is preferable for Indonesian learners since they may help students with some language barrier, especially those relate to culture. Nonnative English teacher will explain cultural thing way better than native English teacher. On the other hand, native English teacher will provide contextual/practical English that will be beneficial for learners. It shows that students want to learn practical English that will allow them to function in different contexts and that will facilitate their communication with many different nationalities, hence their penchant towards an international variety (Lafaye and Tsuda, 2002).

3.3 English hour in university

In the context of English in higher education, the amount of English hour is also important. This research considers this feature as one of the parameter to measure the need of English in higher education. The data reveals that most of the students want to add their English hour in their university. Table 3 shows students' opinion whether or not they need to add their English hour.

Table3. Distribution of English Hour in University

No	Additional English Hour	Thailand		Indonesia	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
1	Yes	21	22	15	18
2	No	7	8	11	10
3	Neither	2	-	4	2
Total		30	30	30	30

Out of 120 students, 76 students (63.3%) who consist of 21 male Thailand students, 22 female Thailand students, 15 male Indonesian students, and 18 female Indonesian students state that they need more English hour in their university. In their opinion, their English hour is not enough thus they need more English hour.

The second group thinks that their English hour is enough so that they do not need more English hour in their university. This group consists of 36 students (30%) that include 7 male Thailand students, 8 female Thailand students, 11 male Indonesian students, and 10 female Indonesian students. Based on their opinion, they feel that the English hour in their department is enough.

The third group is those who cannot determine whether or not they need to add the English hour in their university. This group consists of 8 students (6.7%) that comprise 2 male Thailand students, 4 male Indonesian students, and 2 female Indonesian students. In general, most of Thailand and Indonesia students still need more English hour in university.

3.4 The level of difficulties of English features

English has at least five features that becomes major interest for English learners i.e. speaking, writing, reading, grammar, and listening. Each skill is unique and so is each student. Based on the questionnaire gathered, grammar becomes the most difficult skill that frightens students as it can be seen in table 4. Table 4 displays the distribution of English based on the level of difficulty.

Table4. Distribution of English Skill based on the level of difficulty

No	English Features	Thailand		Indonesia	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
1	Speaking	12	8	10	8
2	Writing	5	10	11	8
3	Reading	1	3	-	1
4	Grammar	12	9	9	12
5	Listening	-	-	-	1
Total		30	30	30	30

As it has been noted before, grammar becomes the most difficult subject for English learners. There are 42 students (35%) out of 120 respondents that think grammar is the most difficult subject. This group consists of 12 male Thailand student, 9 female Thailand students, and 9 male Indonesian students, and 12 female Indonesian students.

The second most difficult skill is speaking. There are 38 students (31.6%) who state that speaking is a difficult skill. This group covers 12 male Thailand student, 8 female Thailand students, and 10 male Indonesian students, and 8 female Indonesian students.

The third most difficult skill is writing. It has been shown by table 11 that writing is considered as the third difficult skill for Thailand and Indonesian students. There are 34 students (28.4%) who mention that writing is difficult. This group consists of 5 male Thailand student, 10 female Thailand students, and 11 male Indonesian students, and 8 female Indonesian students.

The fourth difficult skill is reading and there are 5 students (4.2%) who agree that reading is a difficult skill. This group includes 1 male Thailand student, 3 female Thailand students, and 1 female Indonesian student.

The least difficult skill is listening. There is only 1 student (0.8%) who mentions that listening is difficult. It is only 1 female Indonesian student who thinks that listening is difficult.

Why grammar becomes the most difficult feature in English has been discussed long before. Some students highlight that grammar is difficult because there are some inconsistencies in English grammar. Rule in making plural, for example, is usually constructed by adding s/es to the nouns as we can see in book (singular) becomes books (plural). However, plural can also be formed by changing the vowel of the noun such as in foot and feet. Surprisingly, ox (singular) becomes oxen (plural) is another inconsistency in English grammar. Those inconsistencies make grammar as the most complicated feature of English.

3.5 Students' preferable ways to improve their English

Students play significant role in the context of higher education. Each student is unique and they have different characteristics which then influence the way they study their English. This research enlists at least four effective ways that are commonly applied by students to improve their English. There are listening to English songs, watching English movie, practicing English with partners, and self-learning. Out of these four ways, watching English movie tends to be the most preferable way to improve students' English mastery. Table5 displays the distribution of the most preferable ways to improve students' English.

Table 5 The Distribution of the most preferable way of Improving Students' English

No	Ways of Learning	Thailand		Indonesia	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
1	Listening English songs	6	9	10	7
2	Watching English movies	14	17	8	13
3	Practicing English with partner	4	3	9	7
4	Self-Learning	6	1	3	3
Total		30	30	30	30

Table 5 indicates that watching English movies is the most preferable way to improve students' English as it displays 52 students (43.4%) that consist of 14 male Thailand students, 17 female Thailand students, 8 male Indonesian students, and 13 female Indonesian students who like to watch English movies.

The second preferable way to improve students' English is by listening to English songs. There are 32 students (26.6%) who like to listen to English songs to improve their English. This group consists of 6 male Thailand students, 9 female Thailand students, 10 male Indonesian students, and 7 female Indonesian students.

Practicing English with partners becomes the third way used by students to improve their English. There are 23 students (19.2%) who include 4 male Thailand students, 3 female Thailand students, 9 male Indonesian students, and 7 female Indonesian students like to practice their English with partner as a way to improve their English.

The last preferable way to increase students' English mastery is by self-learning. It becomes the least way to improve students' English since there are only 13 students (10.8%) out of 120 respondents. This way is chosen by 6 male Thailand students, 1 female Thailand student, 3 male Indonesian students, and 3 female Indonesian students.

It can be seen that watching movies is the most preferable way used by students to improve their English. This has to do with respondents' hobbies. It seems that by doing something they like, students may improve their English. It is in line with Behavior theory that highlights a repetitive action will strengthen a condition. By repetitively watching English movies, respondents

can strengthen their English as well as practice it by mimicking or repeating the way the characters in movies produce their English.

4. Conclusion

Having compared among Indonesian and Thai students on their perception towards English in higher education context, it can be seen that they both still consider English as an important language in this era. They still believe that English is still appropriate to be taught in university level and they also still need more or additional English hour in their university. Relate to English features, grammar is the hardest English feature due to the fact that there are some inconsistencies in English grammar. The next similarity among Indonesian and Thai students is that they like watching English movie to improve their English since by watching English movie, students can practice their pronunciation, daily expressions and other English features. Besides those similarities, Thai students and Indonesia students also have differences regarding their language instructor. Thai students prefer to have native instructor and Indonesia students tend to have nonnative English instructor.

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