Open Educational Resources in Enhancing Thai University Students' English Language Learning

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Abstract

With the emergence, growth, and widespread availability of education technologies, English language teaching (ELT) needs to be shaped differently. That is, technology integration has created a potential educational environment in which language learning across the entire paradigm can be supported. Advancing technology is not only changing the way courses are developed and delivered but also the way a language is learned and taught. These impacts tend to be particularly relevant in higher education in which educational technology more easily accessible and available. This paper aims to explore the potential of open educational resources (OER) in enhancing university students' English language skills through the Moodle system. Methodologically, sets of OER were systematically compiled, and subsequently their content validity was assessed to assure their appropriateness for the university students' English proficiency level. A total of 189 first year students in humanities from a medium sized university participated in this study during a semester break. Prior to the OER exposure, the participants completed a questionnaire eliciting personal information and relevant information regarding their English learning behaviors and attitudes, followed by a pretest on English language skills. Then, the students were encouraged to freely explore and exploit the OER available on the Moodle system for a period of 19 days. After the OER exposure, a parallel online posttest was administered, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The pretest/posttest score comparison shows significant gain scores in all language skills. The findings suggest that the integration of the OER bears significant pedagogical implications and applications for curriculum designers, teachers, and students. The questionnaire and interview data reveal interesting findings about the students' engagement and interaction with the system, which should be considered in the future when blending technology oriented methodology into the instruction process for Thai learners. This study represents a wake-up call for ELT stakeholders to prepare to shift away from traditional teaching approaches, to modify teachers' behaviors, syllabus, and curriculum, and to empower teachers to successfully cope with the changing educational environment.

Keywords: *OER, university students, English language skills, Thai learners;*

1. Introduction

Technology has had a massive impact on the way we lead our lives since it was globally introduced. It is clear that technology affects all aspects of our life; education is no exception. The emergence, growth, and widespread availability of education technologies has had a considerable impact on English language teaching. That is, technology integration has created a potential educational environment in which language learning across the entire paradigm can be supported. Consequently, how English education is delivered needs to be adjusted. Advancing technology is not only changing the way courses are developed and delivered but also the way a language is learned and taught. Specifically, in higher education around the world, the impact of advancing technology is particularly relevant, allowing teaching materials to be more easily accessible and available [1].

Despite the availability of education technology and the importance of English as a common means of communication regionally and internationally, it is unfortunate that Thai learners' English has been found to be unsatisfactory, be it gauged by national tests or international tests. For instance, according to the O-NET (Ordinary National Educational Test) national tests in English administered to Grades 6, 9 and 12 students nationwide, Thai students' average scores have been low for a number of years. Similarly, Thai learners' English as assessed by TOEFL of ETS or EPI of EF has been labeled as low proficiency. These indicators are forcing Thai educators to realize that some crucial action needs to be taken immediately to rectify and ameliorate the situation. At this juncture, given the prominent and positive role of technology in enhancing language learning as evidenced by a number of previous studies conducted in multiple settings and across educational levels [2, 3], it is interesting

to examine whether the application of technology could enhance Thai university students' English language skills.

2. The study

2.1 Objective
Given the existence, prevalence, and a wide range of open educational resources or OER on the internet, this paper primarily highlights the role of OER in enhancing various English language skills. The objective of this study is to determine whether the sets of OER could increase Thai university students' English language skills: grammar, expressions, listening, factual reading, vocabulary, and literary reading.

2.2 Participants
The participants of this study included first-year students in the Faculty of Arts at a medium sized university near Bangkok, because it is known that the students particularly in humanities are highly motivated to learn the English language. The final pool includes 189 first year university students who volunteered to participate .

2.3 Instruments
Several instruments were devised. First, six sets of OER links were systematically compiled represensing the six language skills for the students to be exposed to, and subsequently scrutinized by three faculty member experts (2 international and 1 Thai) for content validity, accuracy, and apporpriateness. Once validated, the lessons were made available online through the Moodle system. Next, a profile questionnaire was distributed to elicit personal information and relevant information regarding the students' English learning behaviors and attitudes. Then, six sets of pretests and parallel posttests were developed to assess whether the students had gained additional English knowledge from the OER exposure. The pretests and posttests, containing 40 items for each skill, followed the same multiple choice format. The three experts validated the parallel nature and content of the pretests and the posttests.

2.4 Procedures
The participants were informed about this project objective and volunteered to participate in this study. On the pretest day, each set of the pretest with 30 minutes allocation was traditionally administered on campus. After the pretests, the students returned to their home for the university semester break. The OER lessons were made accessible through the Moodel system. The students were encouraged to freely explore the OER on the Moodle system for a period of 19 days. After the OER exposure, the parallel online posttests were administered, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The pretest and posttest scores were calculated using descriptive statistics. In addition, the mean scores of the pretests and posttests were analyzed using a *t*-test to determine if the gain score difference was significant.

3. Results and discussion
It should be noted that the integration of ICT in language learning allowed the students to have freedom to access the materials at their leisure. As a result, the students' access to the lessons through the Moodle system was not controlled. The descriptive statistics conducted on the pretest and postest scores produced the following results (Table 1 and Figure 1).

	Grammar		Listening		Expressions		Factual Reading		Literary Reading		Vocabulary	
	Pre	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**
Max	39	39	36	37	38	40	37	39	38	31	37	40
Min	9	12	11	12	4	7	10	8	0	6	8	5
Mean	**28.41**	**31.77**	**24.25**	**26.62**	**30.47**	**34.16**	**30.47**	**31.34**	**15.14**	**17.54**	**23.22**	**29.41**

Table 1. Pretest and posttest scores across the six language skills

As shown, the students' mean pretest scores of individual language skills varied to a certain extent, ranging from 15 (literary reading) to 30 (expressions). The low literary reading mean score in the pretest can be attributed to the fact that this skill is relatively new to the students, as it is generally taught to second year students. However, the comparison of the mean pretest and posttest scores of individual skills are elucidating (Figure 1).
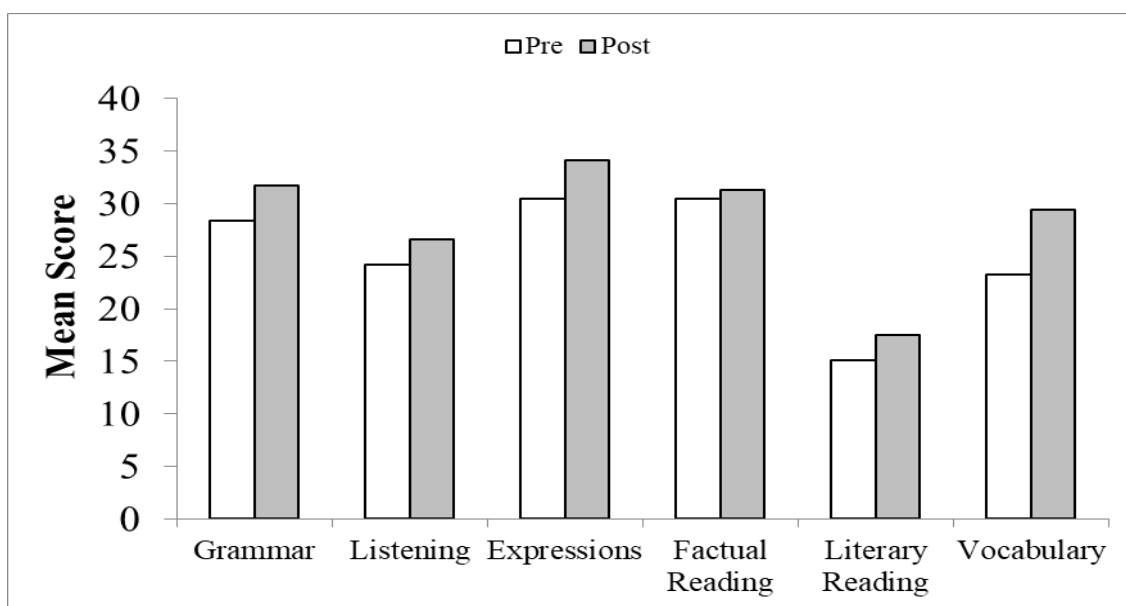

Fig. 1. Comparison of pretest and posttest scores

Focusing on the mean scores across the six language skills, the comparison shows that, after 19 days of exposure to the lessons, the students' language skills improved across the board, as shown in Figure 1. In order to establish whether the knowledge gained in each language skill is significant, a t-test was conducted. In Table 2 and in congruence with [3, 4, 5, 6], a significant gain was observed across the board.

Paired Samples		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	S.D.	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Grammar	-2.373	4.317	.412	-3.189	-1.557	-5.764	109	.000*
Pair 2	Listening	-1.765	5.053	.500	-2.757	-.772	-3.527	101	.001*
Pair 3	Expressions	-2.772	5.505	.496	-3.755	-1.790	-5.585	122	.000*
Pair 4	Factual Reading	-3.510	5.578	.564	-4.629	-2.392	-6.229	97	.000*
Pair 5	Literary Reading	-1.976	4.999	.444	-2.854	-1.099	-4.455	126	.000*
Pair 6	Vocabulary	-4.447	5.616	.526	-5.489	-3.405	-8.455	113	.000*

Table 2. *t*-test on test scores of the six skills

Based on interviews, the students were generally content with the lessons and enjoyed the free availability of the lessons. However, as confessed in their interviews and supported by their sporadic access to the lessons recorded by the system, they seemed to lack control when disciplining themselves to access the lessons. When asked to choose either to learn the lessons online or in classrooms, they opted for the combined nature of both traditional classroom and online learning. They believe that with this combination, they would be somehow forced to be more disciplined and responsible, attending classes while enjoying freedom to access the online lessons whenever they wanted to.

In conclusion, this study has shown that an online system plays a part in scaffolding language learning. As demonstrated, catalyzed by the rise of the digital age and the ubiquitous, exponential technological changes, teaching/learning needs to change. The notion of learner-centered and non-traditional teaching should be embraced, rendering traditional teaching in a teacher-fronted classroom to be challenged. This finding resonates with the blended learning approach [7], a strategy emphasizing individual learning which intentionally transfers instruction from a teacher-oriented to a learner-centered model. In this approach, teachers being recognized as an important component of high quality education programs, reshaping the way teaching/learning takes place. In short, integrating ICT in instruction to captivate and engage learners is substantiated by this study.

This research suggests that the OER integration bears a number of practical pedagogical implications and applications for curriculum designers, teachers, and students. Moreover, while the students are expected to be lifelong learners, the teachers are also strongly encouraged to be lifelong learners. That is, teachers need to be aware of and updated on new or latest technologies. The interview data highlights the students' engagement and interaction with the system, which obviously needs to be considered in the future when blending technology oriented methodology into the instruction. Although Thai students agreed that online lessons are beneficial and accommodate their needs, the opportunities to physically be in classrooms with the teachers compel them to be responsible. This study represents a wake-up call for ELT stakeholders in Thailand to prepare to shift away from traditional teaching approaches, to modify teachers' behaviors, syllabus, and curriculum, and to empower teachers to successfully cope with the changing educational environment.

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