

Investigating College Student Attitudes towards Learning English and their Learning Strategies: Insights from Interviews in Thailand

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This small-scale interview-based case study conducted in Thailand has pursued a dual thesis. The primary objective is that of an examination into the perceptions among Thai college students in Thailand towards selected English language learning strategies, their own learning experiences prior to entry to their English-medium college, and finally their beliefs concerning native- and non-native teachers of English. Its findings show a surprisingly diversified set of experiences and influences towards English language learning and their teachers existed among students upon entry to the college. A second focus of the study, that of an enquiry into a suitable methodology for this sample size and cultural setting, reveals that a semi-structured interview format was practical for the various levels of linguistic ability and conceptual awareness among students interviewed in English. Also, of some significance is the adapted methodology employed for 'reducing' the large amount of interview data collected. This dual focus to the study has served the purpose of not simply revealing the attitudes towards English language learning of a small group of Thai college entrants, but also informs teacher-researchers in similar settings as to appropriate interview technique and data reduction.

This study describes and discusses an investigation into the English language learning strategies and attitudes of Thai students in a Thai college

context. That context itself is of great importance since it influences what those attitudes and learning strategies are among a small group of new college entrants and also the methodology by which such a body of 'knowledge' can be best gathered.

CONTEXT

The setting is a small English-medium two-year Engineering and Business college in Thailand which, quite soon after opening, began to experience in its first few semesters some growing pains. Students who had passed the prerequisite English preparation course and started on their content-based courses in Engineering or Business began to have both comprehension and methodology-related problems with lectures by the native speaker teachers. Lecturers too complained of silent classes, non-responsive students, plagiarism and a general lack of self-dependence. As the Head of Academic Studies responsible for English language and content-matter courses at that time, I decided that some action was required to address this potentially escalating discontent. A program of awareness-raising workshops was created for both staff and students on topics such as "What makes a good learner?" and "What is a good teacher?", as well as observation of classes to see how students and teachers were interacting. Integral to the whole program was the collection of information on new entrants' attitudes towards English language learning, selected strategies in learning, and their English learning histories to disseminate back to all the teaching staff.

At the time of conducting the research in mid-1999, the objective was two-fold: to meet and interview all new students (eighteen in total) and, through this process, to raise their awareness, and inform me, of their own strategies and attitudes towards studying English; the second objective was subsequently to pass the information back to the staff so that they could understand the backgrounds of their future students. What actually transpired during the research process itself was something slightly different. During the

interviewing of the students it occurred to me that, although generalisability of my findings was not a primary consideration at the time due to the small number of interviewees in an “intrinsic case study” (Stake, 1995), the methodology of data collection and analysis could in fact be applied to other college settings. Other settings mean actually not just colleges in Thailand but possibly elsewhere, including my present working situation in a Japanese college. In brief, this study has dual objectives: firstly, to describe how a group of Thai students learned English upon entry to an English language preparation course at an Engineering college in Thailand, and secondly, to illustrate a methodological approach for collecting that information in small-scale research settings. For the researcher interested in attitudes towards learning English and what strategies they employ in similar post-secondary school contexts, I would argue that there may also be resonance in what is found even among a small group of Thai college entrants.

The structure of the study is to firstly review the literature in the field of interviewing and learning strategies, in particular with reference to Thai students. Secondly, the methodological approach of interviewing, including the rationale for the choice of interview questions, and then the means of data reduction will be described, after which the findings will focus exclusively on the learning strategies and attitudes of the interviewed students. Finally, conclusions will be drawn on the practical implications this study carries in terms of understanding and researching language learning strategies for Thai students, and also of how this study could be expanded upon.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this review of the literature, I initially review English language learning strategies and then follow with a discussion of the chosen research methodology of interviewing, both with particular relation to Thai learners.

Learning Strategies and Thai Learners

I turn firstly to the area of learning strategies. As the literature focusing on Thai learners is sparse, some references to 'Asian' learners as a whole will be made. Firstly, Wenden (1991, p. 18) reminds us of the lack of consensus as to what a learning strategy really is but suggests that it is more "problem-oriented" than a learning 'style', which itself is more "enduring" in nature. Learning strategies are, according to Wenden (1991), more easily changed or discarded and may also be either "deployed consciously" or "automaticised". Various researchers have created typologies of the strategies commonly employed by learners, mostly embrace cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Wenden, 1991), but have also been expanded to cover "social mediation" (O'Malley et al, 1985), "affective strategies", "compensation strategies" and "memory strategies" (Oxford, 1990, pp. 8-9). Wenden (1991, p. 19) defines cognitive strategies as "mental steps that learners use to process both linguistic and sociolinguistic content". Vandergrift (1999, p. 170) adds to this by emphasising the cognitive ability of the learner towards "manipulation of the material", thereby enabling that learner to retain a degree of flexibility in strategy application (Oxford, 1990, p. 13).

Turning specifically to Asian learners, it is often presumed by western lecturers that they have limited learning strategies knowledge due to an over-emphasis at school upon rote-learning. To counter this assumption, Biggs (1994) and Littlewood (2000) remind us of the dangers of stereotyping Asian students as employing simplistic, low-level cognitive skills involving basic rote-learning and repetition from their L1 (first language) learning experiences. Biggs (1994), in investigating this stereotype, suggests that the teaching strategy often employed in the west of expecting rapid responses to teacher questions is actually not beneficial to the development of cognitive skills among students. Such development requires 'wait time' after the teacher initiation, often the case among many Asian teachers. Consequently, Asian students can actually develop higher-level cognitive skills by consulting with their peers. This enables students to create a "social support

system” in which “cognitive related assistance” is made available to new entrants in the class (Mohamed, 1997, p. 166). Biggs (1994) regards this type of interaction as a valuable exploitation of the students' preference for working in groups, yet recent research by Smith (2001) in a Japanese tertiary context doubts this preference, showing that some students actually favour individual rather than co-operative post-task consolidation.

Most importantly in the literature on autonomy in language learning, Sinclair (1997) argues that there is a cultural imposition of values if western teachers in Asian settings force students to adopt autonomous learning modes. Indeed, it is often reported that idealistic moves to create independent, reflective learners in tertiary settings encounter problems with some Asian learners who may find it hard to relinquish their old strategies quickly. This often occurs on imported western English preparation courses where mismatches between learning and teaching strategies exist (Bialystok, 1985; O'Malley, 1987). In the case of Thai students experiencing similar difficulties, Holmes and Tangtongtavy (1995) offer an explanation by referring to the concept of *krengjai*, whereby Thais show reluctance towards expressing direct feedback to their seniors. In terms of this concept's relevance to strategies, it suggests that a Thai student may not be readily able to initiate questions directly to the teacher in the classroom. A further concept, that of *sam ru am* (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995), places an emphasis in Thai Buddhism upon the ability to show restraint and composure in stressful situations, thereby creating the impression that the Thai learner is passive in discussions or classroom debate. Further to this, Buripakdi and Mahakhan (1980, p. 269) remind us, there is seemingly a lack of “critical questioning of facts, reasons, and assumptions” among students in the Thai educational system which leads foreign teachers to conclude that the Thai student is unable to think critically, is used only to ‘reproduce’ learning and is therefore unprepared for the western curriculum's demands for speculation in academic discourse.

In contrast to this potentially negative view of Thai behaviour in educational settings (in the eyes of the native speaker of English), Ma Rhea

(1995) points out that Thais possess a different sense as to what actually constitutes 'knowledge' which takes the form of a contextual flexibility in social settings, including the classroom. This manifests itself in situations where Thais appear to interact harmoniously in groups. A further perspective to cast insight on Thai behaviour is that given by Mulder (1996) of the informal to formal spheres of social interaction, termed as the *khuna – decha* continuum of social behaviour. If the classroom is considered to be a social sphere in its own right, then Thai students may conceivably regard their teachers as being close to the *decha* as great respect is exhibited to teachers in Thailand. The assumption by the western teacher attempting to deformalize relations towards the most familiar *khuna* realm is clearly precarious. This potential mismatch in assumptions between learner and student may, in turn, have some effect upon how new learning strategies are perceived by Thais not just in the classroom, but also in the interview setting.

Interviewing

One of the first considerations to make when teachers interview their own students in an educational setting is that there is a possibility that asymmetrical relations may exist during the interview itself due to an "overlap" (McCarthy, 1991, p. 124) of roles from the classroom to the interview setting. In this sense, an interview may become a situation bound by the same intrinsic formality that the students are used to in the classroom, compelling them to "abide by certain communicative norms" associated with their prior learning experiences (Briggs, 1986, p. 2). If such formality is extreme, then the use of interviews as a means to gather students' real feelings needs to be reconsidered and possibly replaced by methodologies which do not involve face-to-face interaction with those of higher status.

Despite the pitfalls facing the researcher using interviews, there are possible advantages to the collection of data through direct encounters with participants. The semi-structured type of interviewing is seen by Cohen and Manion (1994) and Nunan (1992) as the preferred choice for researchers

wishing to 'interpret' responses from interviewees as it does not need to have a list of standardized questions. In this sense, it is less formal in structure since there is a guiding set of topics, resulting in a "flexibility" which allows the interviewer, as Nunan (p. 149) indicates, to 'steer' the interview talk rather than simply rely upon set questions. In this process, an eclectic array of probes, prompts, open or closed question forms can be used which give the interviewer a "free form" (Drever, 1995, p. 13) to diverge, change or omit areas raised in the course of the interview. Although it appears that such a style of interviewing is most suited to qualitative researchers wishing to explore deeply into a set of topics, care must be taken in that, in doing so, "important and salient topics may be inadvertently omitted" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 271). Furthermore, the constant variation from interview to interview in question forms may be criticised as creating non-standardisation across interviews. In response, Gorden (1969) argues, however, that such variation is, in fact, a positive move towards the standardisation of 'meaning' rather than that of the question forms themselves. This would, in theory, be a flexible means to accommodate the differing linguistic and conceptual levels of interview participants to the core meaning intended in each research question. In this regard, it could be regarded as a practical mechanism for the interviewer to spontaneously deal with non-comprehension, particularly when the topic of learning strategies is raised since, as Field (1978, p. 116) indicates, strategies are often "unconscious" to students even if they employ them regularly. If other methodological approaches to collect such data are considered, such as questionnaires, then there exists no means to accommodate the variation in students' linguistic and conceptual competences. Semi-structured interviewing presents a means to achieve that flexibility.

Interview Structure and Considerations

The interview structure conducted in June 1999 was formulated from the taxonomies of O'Malley et al. (1985) and Oxford (1990) embracing metacognitive, cognitive, social mediation, affective, memory and compensation learning

strategies. It was piloted once leading to some minor alterations. The final interview format consisted of five topic areas (see Appendix 1 in bold) followed by optional 'support' questions (non-bold type) which were used to reinforce, or clarify, the 'lead' question and therefore help students become aware of strategies they possess if the first topic opening ("I'd like to talk about your previous experiences in learning English") failed to elicit sufficient responses. The five basic topics chosen as 'lead' questions were: 1) previous learning experiences and present perceptions about strategies, 2) teachers and their influence and status, 3) collaboration, 4) self-responsibility, and 5) self-management awareness. These topic areas reflected a mixture of direct enquiries into strategy use and beliefs about learning. For this purpose, question 1 investigated present perceptions about strategies (for all skills). Question 3 looked at collaboration in the classroom, focusing on the willingness to engage in pair and group work. Question 4 attempted to elicit responses concerning the use of the college Self Access Center and how students perceived a non-teacher- directed mode of study. The last question 5 moved from the idea of responsibility pursued in the previous question on to the related theme of self-management, attempting to contrast the students' perceptions of the role of the high school teacher in monitoring their note-taking and file organization with that of the western college lecturer who, in this setting, expected students to adopt an attitude of efficient self-management of their notes. Question 2 differed in that it focused not directly on the aforementioned strategies, but rather on the attitudes and beliefs towards studying English with a native speaker teacher in contrast to studying with a Thai teacher of English. This question specifically aimed to investigate student perceptions about the role of the teacher in the learning process in terms of teaching methodology and after-class holistic care of students.

The motivation for such a choice of questions focusing on strategies and beliefs about learning and teaching emanated from discussions with lecturers who had complained of difficulties with the previous intake of students into the engineering and business programs, as outlined in the section entitled

Context. After examining these complaints, I attempted to formulate topics connected with the literature, as for example, the idea of “social mediation” (O'Malley et al., 1985), resulting in question 3 on collaboration in and outside the classroom. The wide embracing range of strategies in the taxonomies of O'Malley et al (1985) and Oxford (1990) led me to include specific skills-based questions, as in question 1. Furthermore, the more learner-centred questions about self-management, self-responsibility emanated from the necessity to develop the metacognitive skills as outlined in these taxonomies. The topic introduced in question 2, that of the contrast between native and non-native teachers teaching and responsibilities towards the students, originated in the college teachers' complaints that previous students seemed over-dependent on them. With the impartial objective during the interviews of simply wishing to discover the reason for such feelings of dependency, I connected the opening question 1 about previous learning experiences with question 2 which sought to contrast previous teachers and present ones. This move to make a subtle contrast without stating that one approach was better than the other came from Sinclair's (1997) advice that imposing autonomous learning modes on to Asian students could result in a potential backlash, i.e. that students could perceive the teacher as being too distant or uncaring.

As for the intake of students under investigation, eighteen were interviewed over a period of 3 weeks from the beginning of their required English language preparation course in June 1999 before entry to their two-year Engineering or Business Diploma studies (Thai colleges have two entry points to their studies – June and November). Most interviews lasted from fifteen to twenty-five minutes.

Informed Consent

In terms of the issue of ethics under consideration for this research, various stages were involved. The first was to inform all the new college entrants as to the purpose of the study in the form of a brief letter. Students were asked if they wished to participate in interview-based research which had the

intention of informing the teaching staff about how they learned English. Participating students showed no objection to audio-taping and use of their first names or nicknames (often Thais choose nicknames to identify themselves informally among friends), however, no family names were used in the presentation of the findings to preserve anonymity.

Reducing the Data

Before the analysis of the eighteen collected interview transcripts, it is important to briefly describe the methodology of analysis employed. Hycner (1985) gives a comprehensive 15-step set of guidelines from transcription to a final summary of findings for a qualitative reduction analysis of interview data which I have adapted to suit my purposes. Among those steps I have amended, Hycner (1985) proposes that the interviewee be interviewed twice and that of other researchers check the findings. I have avoided these particular steps on time grounds and have used a condensed version of the remaining essential steps, as follows:

- 1) The transcription of the interviews including extra notes on body language in brackets.
- 2) A qualitative “reduction” of the data in each individual interview, in which I note down from the transcription what the interviewee was generally attempting to convey in the five strategy topic areas. In this process I paraphrase the interviewee’s responses as well as use direct quotations.
- 3) The third stage involves a condensation of the messages in stage two and visually **highlights** on the word-processor only those which directly concern learning strategies. In this way, irrelevant information is discarded, i.e. not highlighted.
- 4) Stage four looks at all the interviews conducted. I firstly gather all the highlighted areas, constituting, in effect, all the relevant pieces of information from the interviews for each of the five topic areas. Thereafter, five summaries can be compiled with the highlighted information which, in essence, represent the findings of my research.

To illustrate this 4-step process, I refer to the interview with Rung on question 6 concerning favourite teachers:

(Bold type denotes the interviewer)

“6. Right. Who was your favorite teacher at school and why?”

Ummm...for English ?

Yes, if you wish.

A woman at St Pauls because I could understand her clearly...so we loved her...she very kind.

Was she Thai ?

No, a foreigner. A nun.”

This leads to Stage 2’s “reduction” (Hycner, 1985) in which I summarise and paraphrase Rung’s comments: *Her favourite teacher was a foreign nun who was very kind and clear.* Stage 3 involves the highlighting of the relevant words to the research, as follows in its full form for the interviewee’s responses to question 6:

Rung feels it’s best to ask questions during class rather than after class like many Thais. Her favorite teacher was a foreign nun who was very “kind” and clear. She has very positive feelings towards foreign teachers, believing them to be different from Thai teachers. She thinks Thai teachers are too tidy sometimes. There are differences between all teachers whether foreign or Thai.

Visually, this aids me when scanning through all the interview highlights concerning favourite teachers in order to recognise common or similar language to determine themes for stage 4. In this case, I scan through the eighteen highlighted summaries and can identify language such as clear, clearly, lovely, Thai, and psychology. My subsequent conclusions focus mainly on those common highlights. Methodologically viewed, this process of highlighting in individual interviews and collecting those, albeit subjective, key words across the interviews represents a potentially effective means to reduce interview data in small-scale research.

FINDINGS

The findings from the interviews can be separated into two parts: firstly, a tabulated record of the English language learning histories of each student which helps in providing an easily accessible overview of those interviewed; secondly, the summaries of each learning strategies topic across the interviews.

Student Background

As can be seen from Appendix 2, all students had previously studied English either in Thailand at state secondary and high school, international school or university. The breakdown of English language learning experiences of the interviewees, taken from the information provided in the interviews themselves, can further contextualise the research.

This background information was compiled as a reference tool for both myself in the interpretation of the interview data, and also for other teaching staff. It was distributed among staff when the learning strategies findings were disseminated with the purpose of providing a convenient overview of the learning histories of all the new English preparation course entrants.

Following the four-stage model of data analysis outlined in the methodological description, the next stage is to present the findings in student responses among the five topic areas.

Previous Learning Experiences and Present Perceptions about Strategies

Most students who had had non-native speaker teachers for English classes previously were not regularly exposed to language learning games or conversational practice in the classroom. Those from international schools or universities were more likely to have taken English lessons from a regular native speaker teacher whose methodologies involved less drilling, memorisation and grammar-translation than those of non-native speaker teachers.

In large classes (in some cases 50 students) several students noted that other students did not share their enthusiasm for speaking activities:

“I didn’t like that some students didn’t like to speak” (Burin)

“I am eager to learn. But some friends were not so eager.....to participate”
(Serm)

Many students admitted to feeling nervous of making mistakes with native speakers and of communication break-down, some saying they were less nervous speaking English with other non-native speakers on campus with whom they had adopted a grammatically simplified ‘pidgin’, called ‘Thaiglish’ (a mixture of English and Thai).

On reading strategies, most students from Thai Secondary Schools had limited knowledge of any strategy apart from intensive reading of every word in the text and constant reference to a dictionary. Those from international school and university backgrounds had more knowledge of skimming and scanning and the importance of guessing meaning from context.

Most students had little awareness of what listening strategies they possessed for either the pre-listening task stage or on task stage. This topic needed much support questioning:

“Do you think about what you are going to be listening to ...I mean before you listen? (unsure look)...well sometimes I try to guess a little but I’m not sure I can think...know what I will hear.” (Mingmanee)

Although most students were not used to the length of academic writing in English required at their new college, most could outline some form of process. Some mentioned that they would transfer the same process from writing Thai language assignments, especially those who had some experience at other Thai colleges or universities before coming to this college. Those who had come directly from Thai secondary school professed that few essays had been written in either Thai or English before. Several responses revealed that strategies taught in the first weeks of the preparation course classes were

being adopted, as in the following with Rung:

“And how do you get ready to write an essay?

Now I plan...but not before.

Oh, because of what I taught you this week?

(laughs) yes.”

This pointed to an increasing, yet unavoidable, degree of invalidity in the research as the interview scheduling progressed into term time.

Teachers and their Influence/Status

On the topic of student to teacher questions in class, most students from a Thai secondary school background felt uncomfortable due to various reasons: the risk of making the teacher lose face, cultural unacceptability, giving the teacher the impression of not listening, embarrassment among peers, the risk of punishment even, the difficulty of timing, and the impracticalities of student to teacher questioning in large classes. Some said that after-class questioning may be more acceptable. Most interesting was one comment by Nart who said that to ask a Thai teacher of English a question in class might give the impression that students were not willing to “pay attention to their teacher”. The most common quoted way of gaining understanding at Thai secondary school was to consult fellow students quietly in class or afterwards. Related to this, Ken indicated that he felt that in-class passivity among Thai students was not a negative reflection of the real relationship existing between Thai teachers and their students in which much pastoral care existed:

“In Thailand, sir...teacher very important...like father in the family, so we listen and write. I know not a good way to speak English but Thai way.”

On the comparison between foreign (native speaker) teachers and Thai teachers, foreign teachers of English were generally believed to facilitate the

learning process whereas Thai teachers were mostly seen as transmitters of input needed for examination purposes. Despite these broad differences mentioned in terms of in-class methodologies affecting students' strategies, it was noted that Thai teachers have a deeper awareness of student-related problems and “psychology” and approach students when their instinct tells them that a student may be having problems:

“...Difficult to explain...Thai teachers know the.....(long pause)...feeling of the students...so they know how to explain everything, I think.”
(Mingmanee)

Another student (Pong) noted that Thai teachers tended to show what he called more “emotion” about their students’ study performance as a way to motivate them. In contrast, several students mentioned that foreign teachers were less emotional face to face with their students.

When asked about their favourite teacher and their characteristics, very few mentioned the methodologies employed by those teachers, referring instead to qualities of being “kind”, “lovely” (in Thai “worthy of being loved”), and explaining points in a “clear” manner so that students did not need to make clarification requests in class time.

Collaboration

Most students viewed collaboration in or out of class as a valuable means of enhancing learning, in contrast with their experiences at secondary schools. The chance to “share ideas” was often quoted as a valid reason to collaborate, as well as a feeling of responsibility for stronger students to help weaker ones. However, others also mentioned the dangers of “lazy” students not contributing to group work and therefore taking advantage of others. Some commented that there were differences in attitude towards collaborative tasks between those who had studied abroad and those who had not. This is illustrated in the following:

“...I see that other Thais are not individual in the way they work. They can be creative but I think, how can I explain...some who are creative are shy or afraid to speak out in class...so group work is best for them.” (Aniruth who had both German and International secondary school experience)

There is here the suggestion that those who have studied abroad may not regard group work as beneficial for them, but just a means to develop those with less communicative confidence. It was also noted that if opinions differ among members during collaborative task work a sense of “disharmony” may arise which could be damaging to the group dynamics.

Self Responsibility

Self-responsibility for one’s own learning was regularly quoted as one of many students’ recommended strategies for language learning and most students’ initial reactions to their views on the Self Access Center were indeed positive. The novelty of being able to choose what to study for themselves in particular was often quoted, as well as its new student-centred rather than teacher-centred concept in how to learn. Sangdaew noted that not all English language input can emanate from teachers, as traditionally expected by Thais:

“..we cannot to rely on teachers for everything”

In contrast, others commented quite clearly on problems with motivation among the Self-Access Center users since the concept of autonomous learning was not yet fully appreciated by some students:

“Do you think you can learn a lot in the Self-Access center?
...(sceptical look)..no, sir...Thai students do not have self-response to study by themselves” (Porn)

And Song:

“I know students, well, they...you know, they maybe don't understand yet that they gotta do something by themselves”

Aniruth and Krissada also talked of other ways to show responsibility for learning after school rather than in the twice a week scheduled Self-Access slots on the timetable, for example, by visiting libraries and accessing the internet outside college.

Self-management Awareness

Some students had become aware of the importance of good organisational skills in studying from their previous teachers and relatives, yet few students seemed to have the self-confidence to proclaim themselves to be “well-organised”, most claiming to be lazy and badly organised until studying for important exams compelled them to arrange their notes. Very few students said that their Thai teachers checked their notes to monitor their note-taking strategies as was currently the policy on the English preparation course.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions to be drawn from this research will look at the learning strategies of Thai students in this study and the research methodology needed to gather such data effectively in the small-scale college setting. Some directions for future research will also be addressed.

Learning Strategies

Reviewing the research findings reveals that most students coming directly from a secondary school background to the college had little experience of writing long essays in either Thai or English, however, some did have practical awareness of a ‘process’ of writing. Feedback on listening strategies provided only the insight that little awareness existed about what strategies

were employed, which may be a result of inadequate questioning or a reflection of the actual lack of awareness of any strategy choice available. As for reading strategies, there was generally a low level of awareness apart from that of intensive reading. International school and university students were more likely to have knowledge of other strategies, but were nevertheless very much dictionary-tied. In terms of speaking strategies, awareness of students' own idiosyncratic strategies was spread over all groups. Some students not previously exposed to native speaker instruction actually showed great willingness to try to move away from accuracy-based evaluation of their speaking ability to a more pragmatic self-evaluation and sense of self-satisfaction.

The implications in terms of teaching and encouraging new strategy use for these new college entrant students are, firstly, that the interview process in itself represents a valuable awareness-raising exercise for the students. Secondly, there is already a wealth of experience and knowledge of strategies among them as a body representing two distinct groupings: those previously exposed to native speaker teachers of English and, those who have experienced instruction from non-native speaker teachers of English. The potential for these two groups, in the same class, to exchange information on strategy awareness and knowledge is immense, but the teacher needs to be aware of some superficial harmony when collaborative tasks are introduced as some degree of scepticism exists among students as to the effectiveness of group work, a point which is confirmed in Smith's (2001) findings among Japanese university learners. Finally, the use of the Self-Access Center was received with varying degrees of enthusiasm, some students noting that autonomous learning was perhaps not yet feasible for those who had come from strictly teacher-directed environments.

Generally, in terms of how teachers could react after this strategy 'knowledge' is made available to them, one overriding pre-requisite must be that they need to be aware of the potential effect of the imposition western modes of autonomous learning in class and in the Self Access Center. Apparent contentedness on task from the teacher's perspective may belie

actual friction existing with the Thai group. A further point also challenging this anglo-centric version of a 'knowledgeable' student in terms of strategy choice and awareness is that some consideration should be made of the contextual awareness that Thais themselves view as 'knowledge' (Ma Rhea, 1995).

A final implication for the English preparation course teacher is to recognise that the Thai teacher of English often plays a greater pastoral care role than the native speaker teacher of English in the education of many students. The native speaker teacher may see this as encouraging passiveness and over-dependence in students, yet, in retrospect, the aim to produce students who actively seek teacher advice and initiate discussions could be too great an expectation among new students. It would perhaps be advisable for teachers to be aware of students' expectations that teachers approach them and slowly encourage student initiations, whether in class or tutorials.

Research Methodology

In terms of the possibilities that this study presents to teachers wishing to embark upon similar research in college settings, the flexibility of semi-structured interviewing offers an effective means to investigate learning strategies among students of varying linguistic abilities and conceptual awareness. However, care should be taken in how informally the interviewer wishes to conduct the interview proceedings since the Thai interviewee may actually expect the interaction to be more formal. Of particular importance for a researcher attempting to come to terms with a large amount of interview data is the streamlined methodology adapted from Hycner (1985) which, albeit subjectively, provides a practical path from transcription to a reduced summaries of individual participants and the whole group under investigation.

Directions for Future Research

Perhaps one possible means to expand upon this study is to pursue

interviewing into attitudes towards English language study and learning strategies in a larger-scale study. Another, possibly more directly relevant approach, is to triangulate the present findings with other research methods. Brief mention has been made of the use of questionnaires and how they lack the flexibility to accommodate the varying linguistic and conceptual competences of those being researched. In the case, however, where interviewing itself is seen as impractical due to a larger number of students entering the college, triangulation through the use of questionnaires could be viewed as one initial step in verifying the findings gathered from semi-structured interviewing.

Reference has been made to the ‘resonance’ that the findings hold for college teachers in other Asian settings. Although this study has not dealt specifically with the direct comparison with other Asian learners’ attitudes and adopted strategies, it is clear that similarities may exist, for example in observations made about self-responsibility and collaboration. The potential for research into a closer comparison would entail perhaps the use of the same methodological means of enquiry in other college settings. This comparison across a number of colleges in the Asian setting would represent a collection of “intrinsic case” studies (Stake, 1995), each conducted to improve the local setting, but perhaps as a whole presenting researchers with cross-cultural similarities, or ‘resonances’. Finally, of some potential interest is the concept of adding an element of ‘quality control’ to the interviewing technique employed. If Gorden’s (1969) defence of semi-structured interviewing is accepted as a means to standardise the ‘meaning’ rather than question forms across all interviews conducted, there still exists the danger of unintentional by-passing of the intended topic. To check this, an occasional discourse analysis of the language used by the interviewer within and across the interviews could be conducted. This would help to trace the interviewer’s questioning style and could be seen as a valuable study in itself into ‘interview discourse.’

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions

A. Previous study experiences and present perceptions about strategies

1. How have you studied English before? (what texts, resources, teachers etc) How did your last teacher teach you? (with games, translation, videos, tapes etc.)
2. What did you learn by heart? Do you think memory is important when you learn English? (Why?) Are you a good guesser ? Is that important or not? (Why?)

3. How did you feel about learning English previously? What were some things you enjoyed most? And what did you not enjoy so much?
4. What do you think is the best way to study English? Before you listen to something, do you think about what you are going to listen for? How about reading? Do you read every word? (Why/Why not?) How do you get ready to write an essay? You know, when you know you have to speak English, do you feel nervous? (Why?) Does it worry you if you make mistakes when you speak? (Why?)

B. Teachers and their influence/status

5. Did you use to ask your previous teachers many questions? How do you feel about students who speak a lot or ask questions in class? When is the best time to ask a question?
6. Who was your favorite teacher? Why?
7. Your teachers will all be foreigners. How do you think foreign teachers are different from Thai teachers? Do you think all foreign teachers teach in the same way?

C. Collaboration

8. At some colleges you have to study with a partner or in a group sometimes. How do you feel about that? Is that strange for you? How do you like to study in class? Out of class?

D. Self-responsibility in learning

9. We've got a Self-Access center here. What is it, do you know? Do you think you can learn much by yourself?

E. Self-management awareness

10. When you studied at school, did your teacher look at your files and notes to see if you were well-organised? Do you think you know how to organise yourself in your studies? Tell me how you organise yourself?

APPENDIX 2

Interviewees' Previous Experiences in English Language Learning

<i>Name</i>	<i>Nationality /sex</i>	<i>Kindergarten /Primary</i>	<i>Secondary /High school with NNS or NS teachers</i>	<i>International school or school abroad</i>	<i>University or College studies in Thai/English</i>	<i>Other</i>
Rung	Thai/F		NS			
Burin	Thai/M		NNS			
Orathai	Thai/F		NNS		Thai medium	
Kik	Thai/F	Kindergarten	NNS			lang. school
Sangdaew	Thai/F	Primary	NNS		Thai medium	
Mingmanee	Thai/F		NNS			
Serm	Thai/M		NNS			private IELTS course
Nawarat	Thai/M		NNS			
Krit	Thai/M		NNS			
Porn	Thai/F		NNS		English medium	
Ex	Thai/M		NNS		English medium	
Song	Thai/M	Primary Kindergarten	NNS	USA High School		
Ken	Thai/M	Primary	NNS			
Amm	Thai/F	Primary Kindergarten	NNS			private NS tutors
Nart	Thai/F		NNS			
Pong	Thai/M		NNS			
Krissada	Thai/M		NNS/NS			lang. school
Aniruth	Thai/German /M	Primary	NNS/NS	Germany sec. school + Int. high school in Thailand		

(NS refers to a teacher who is a Native Speaker of English, and NNS to a Non-native Speaker of English; M refers to male and F female. Int. refers to international)