



Western-published ELT Textbooks: Teacher Perceptions and Use in Thai Classrooms

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Introduction

In Southeast Asian countries, the use of western-published English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks instead of locally published ones is prevalent in English language classrooms. Most of the schools, colleges, and universities in Thailand, where English is considered as a foreign language, use western-published ELT textbooks in all of their English language classes. This could be due to the fact that most western-published ELT textbooks have assured the accuracy of the language, and therefore they provide proper models of language use (Tomlinson, 2008).

While there have been some studies on the use of western published ELT textbooks (Hung & Good, 2016; Nomnian, 2013; Seferaj, 2015; Srakang & Janssem, 2013), the issue of how non-native English-speaking teachers use western-published ELT textbooks in EFL classrooms and their challenges with regards to using them remains largely unexplored, especially in the ASEAN region. Thus, the aims of this study are to explore non-native English speaker teachers' perceptions regarding the use of western-published ELT textbooks in EFL classrooms in Bangkok, and to examine how teachers use these textbooks and the challenges they face. It is also hoped that through this study, light would be shed on the issue of the use of western-published ELT textbooks, not just in Thailand, but also in the ASEAN region.

Literature Review

Role of ELT Textbooks in the Classroom

One principal component in English language teaching and language learning is the use of textbooks in the classroom. Vettorel and Lopriore (2013) have stated that textbooks play a central role in English Language teaching. They have long been the primary source of classroom activities and lessons for teachers. Hence, in Southeast Asia, where English is mostly spoken as a foreign language, the use of textbooks in an English classroom is prevalent among schools in the region. The teaching of English is seen to be incomplete without an appropriate textbook being used. Relying so much on textbooks is reflected in the curriculum and program syllabi as teachers often have textbooks as their main reference for teaching.

Both students and teachers can greatly take advantage of the use of ELT textbooks in learning. Lawrence (2011) stated that students can easily review the lessons after and before they are taught by their teachers. Hence, it gives the students an easy access to what has been taught and what will be taught to them by their teachers. Abdelwahab (2013) asserted that the use of textbooks promotes equality of lesson presentations and assessments for students in different classes. In this way, students coming from different groups receive the same lesson content, activities, and other classroom exercises from their teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, can also save time and effort in preparing for the lessons, activities and even lesson evaluations through the use of a textbook in the classroom. One European study that investigated why EFL teachers use western-published teaching materials in their classrooms was conducted by Seferaj (2015). Through the use of a mixed-methods approach to investigate the decision-making of four Albanian English teachers, the researcher revealed that teachers used textbooks in their ELT classes to determine which linguistic items and topics should be taken up in their classes. Teachers also used textbooks as there were exercises and activities that could provide students the opportunity to practice and review the topics that had been presented or would be presented in class.

Despite these benefits, other researchers have raised concerns regarding the use of ELT textbooks (Charalambous, 2011; Forman, 2014; Yastrebova & Chesnokova, 2015). Most of the previous textbook research in ELT focused largely on textbook evaluation and analysis of its content; and a number of these studies have been unfavorable towards the use of ELT textbooks. For example, Simsek (2017) contends that adapting the textbook to suit the class is the only option for teachers whose classroom teaching expectations are not met by the textbook. Thus, the textbook becomes a less important tool for students' learning. Likewise, Casta and Hufana (2016) and Gak (2011) pointed out that textbooks may not have equal emphasis on certain language focus and function; and they may not have what the teachers want to teach with regards to the needs of the students. It is very important to emphasize the needs and goals of both teacher and students when using textbooks in the classroom. Using textbooks which do not match the needs and goals of both teacher and students could result in failure in teaching and learning the English language (Ulla & Winitkun, 2017). Knight (2015) also asserted that quality instruction in the classroom is facilitated by a flexible textbook; that is, a textbook should be able to produce and facilitate learning in an environment where technology is present. Lastly, Reinders and Balçikanli (2011) indicated in their study that autonomous learning among learners is restricted when a textbook is used in the classroom. Learners are restricted only to the tasks and other activities included in the textbook, and there is no opportunity for them to own and be responsible for their learning.

ASEAN Studies on the Use of EFL Textbooks

In the local context, two studies on the use of ELT textbooks in classrooms have been conducted in Thailand. One study was that of Srakang and Jansem (2013). The study concentrated on the perceptions of twelve Grade 10 Thai teachers in the province of Maha Sarakham, Thailand about the use of English textbooks. With the use of questionnaires, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the findings revealed that there was a split in teachers' perceptions with regards to the use of textbooks in the English classroom. Some teachers believed that teaching English in Thailand is not done effectively without the use of textbooks; while others maintained that the use of English textbooks is a waste of time since they lack language focused points, they do not meet the needs of the learners, and the students cannot understand English. However, the teachers agreed that textbooks should go hand in hand with supplementary teaching materials to serve learners' needs.

The second study, which focused on Thai cultural aspects in the ELT textbooks, was conducted by Nomnian (2013). The study, which aimed to guide material developers and teachers as to the appropriateness of the textbooks used in the classrooms, analyzed the cultural content of *World Wonders 1* and *My World Series 2-6*; the textbooks which are commonly used in Thai secondary schools. The findings revealed that Thai cultural aspects were present in the textbook and were acknowledged by

foreign textbook writers. Among the Thai cultural aspects that were given emphasis in the foreign English language textbooks were: products, practices, persons, perspectives, and places.

There are only a small number of empirical studies that have dealt with western-published ELT textbooks in Thailand; their contribution to the learning of English, and their role in an ELT classroom. Understanding how non-native English speaker-teachers use western-published textbooks in the EFL classroom is a significant step towards understanding teachers' objectives in ELT and meeting the needs of the learners. Therefore, this study will investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the non-native English-speaking teachers' perceptions about the use of western-published ELT textbooks book in EFL classrooms?
2. How do EFL teachers use western-published ELT textbooks in their classes?
3. What are the challenges faced by EFL teachers regarding the use of western-published ELT textbooks in their classrooms?

Methodology

Research Setting

Non-native English-speaking teachers who were teaching EFL using Western-published ELT textbooks were the target group for this study. Employing the purposive sampling method, this study was conducted in three universities in Bangkok, Thailand. The choice of the research setting was based on the number of non-native English speaking EFL teachers.

A total of eleven teachers (7 Thais and 4 Filipinos) participated in this study. Nine of the participants were females, while two were males. Three of the participants held a doctorate degree; six had completed their master's degree, and two had completed their bachelor's degree. Participants were aged between 20-54 years old and their teaching experience ranged from three months to sixteen years. These teachers used various Oxford, Pearson Longman, Cambridge, Macmillan, and Heinle/Cengage Learning ELT printed textbooks and workbooks in their English language classes.

Research Tools

Eleven teachers indicated their interest in being interviewed. The in-depth semi-structured interview, which probed teachers' concerns and or issues with regards to using western-published textbooks in their classrooms, were conducted at different times and lasted from 25 minutes to about an hour. There were a total of 5 prepared interview questions but the researcher allowed flexibility in the interview by engaging in follow up questions when needed. The interview was done in person and via Facebook chats.

All 11 teachers were willing to be observed in their classes, but due to time constraints only seven teachers were observed. All of these teachers were teaching in the same university as the researcher. These once-only classroom observations, which lasted for one and a half hours, were conducted to note how these teachers used western-published ELT textbooks in their EFL classroom teaching. Teaching style, classroom activities, and other factors which did not relate to the use of textbooks in the teaching of English were not included in the observation.

Results

Interview Findings

Teachers' perceptions

Based on the interview conducted, although teacher-participants were required by their schools and universities to use western published ELT textbooks in their classrooms, they still had positive perceptions towards the use of them in their English language classes. Most of the teachers believed that using western published ELT textbooks could develop their learners' capability of using the English language as a medium of communication and thought they could provide good models of language in use. Some of the participants disclosed,

Using western-published ELT textbooks in the classroom is of great help not only for us teachers but also for our students. They are essential source of classroom activities, which we can ensure a good model of language in use. Thus, they help us teach effectively. (Participant A)

I use western-published textbook because it is the only book available in our school. However, it guides me in teaching English to my EFL learners. I feel confident and safe in teaching English with western published ELT textbooks. (Participant B)

Teacher-participants also perceived that western published ELT textbooks are the authority of English language learning; and that these textbooks are more reliable than the locally published ones. As such, they thought that it is a must to use them in EFL classes. However, it should be noted that the reason teachers used western published ELT textbooks is that there were no locally published textbooks available. One participant said,

All the English language teaching textbooks that we have in school are all western-published. We do not have a choice really but these textbooks save our daily lesson planning. And I thought that they were more reliable than the locally published ones. (Participant A)

Uses of western-published ELT textbooks

The teacher-participants revealed that they used western-published textbooks in their EFL classrooms for the following reasons. First, using these textbooks saved lesson planning or preparation time. Second, they reinforce their students' understanding of the lesson. They mentioned that,

By using western-published textbook, it makes my classroom discussion easier since it assisted me in managing my daily lessons and helped me to plan my classroom instruction. (Participant C)

Western-published textbook guided and helped me organize my English language discussion. Moreover, it served as a good model for English language learning. (Participant D)

I used western-published textbook in my EFL classroom as my primary source for English language teaching and as a source of language assessment. (Participant B)

Textbooks also served as a syllabus and were used to provide all language skills and content sequence, as well as a source of homework. In fact, teacher-participants felt that using textbooks made them a better teacher.

It should also be noted that although teacher-participants revealed that they teach exclusively from the textbook and use them for all classroom activities and practices, the majority also use other English language teaching materials to facilitate learning.

Challenges

One of the challenges faced by the non-native teacher-participants with regards to the use of western published ELT textbooks is the difficulty of explaining some western concepts to their EFL students. One of the teacher-participants said,

When I taught travel to my students, I remember them asking me about the meaning of the words 'gap year', 'holiday', 'ice skiing', and 'winter'. These words are not used in Thailand and we do not have them here. I found it hard to explain to them. (Participant E)

Another challenge they mentioned was regarding the reinforcement or practice activities in the textbooks. They said that there were only a few authentic language activities for the students to practice on. For example, they mentioned that only one or two practice activities are included for every target skill. This number of activities is not enough for the students to master the language in context. According to the teachers who were interviewed, fluency and other reinforcement activities should be provided in order to help the students use and master the language skills.

Some language focus and grammar points also posed a challenge to the teacher-participants. They revealed that some grammar points are either too easy or difficult for their students' English language proficiency level. They felt that a number of the activities cannot be practiced by the students as they are not suitable for their English language proficiency level. Sometimes, they either skip the lesson or adapt that lesson to suit their learners.

Classroom Observation Findings

Seven teachers were observed for the study. The most important finding from the classroom observation was that western-published textbooks were the primary resource for English language teaching to EFL students. Teachers who were observed while teaching did not use any other printed and published English textbooks to teach English to their students other than the book they were using. However, printed worksheets from online sources, and audio-videos were used to supplement the activities in the class.

Teachers were also observed to be exclusively following the lesson sequence and content provided by the textbook. None of them had designed any other learning activities. The reading article, the dialogue, and the listening practice were all taken from the textbook.

Discussion

This study explored non-native English speaker teachers' perceptions regarding their use of western-published ELT textbooks in Thai EFL classrooms. It examined how teachers use these texts and the challenges they face. Results from the study showed that teachers had positive perceptions towards the use of western-published ELT textbooks. Tomlinson (2008) noted that western-published ELT textbooks provide good models for English language teaching and learning. Most of the teachers surveyed agreed that western-published ELT textbooks are the authority for English language learning. Teachers believed that western published ELT textbooks are more reliable than the locally published ones and they can develop their learners' capability to use the English language as a medium of communication.

Srakang and Jansem (2013) noted that the use of foreign published textbooks in EFL classrooms is necessary as they have been developed by language teaching material developers and specialists. While there may be some local ELT textbooks available in the country, many teachers were required by their employers to use western-published textbooks, most likely as these textbooks were developed by foreign language experts. Nevertheless, teachers felt confident with and enjoyed using western-published ELT textbooks in their EFL classrooms.

Generally, one of the reasons why teachers used western-published textbooks as the primary source for their English language teaching was to save lesson planning/preparation time. Since these foreign ELT textbooks provided a number of activities for language practice, teachers felt it was easier to prepare for their lessons. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) pointed out that textbooks serve as a plan for lessons, topic explanations and other activities in the classroom. Teachers believed that textbooks can help them organize and plan for their daily instruction, assessment, and language activities. This finding corroborates the results from the studies of Charalambus (2011), Cheng, Hung and Chieh (2011), Seferaj (2015), Srakang and Jansem (2013), and Vettorel and Lopriore (2013), which emphasized that the use of textbooks in the classroom can help teachers in their English language teaching. Furthermore, most of the teachers disclosed that they teach primarily from the textbooks. Although participants reported that they used some other secondary materials such as worksheets from online sources, videos from YouTube, and other audio materials, the vast number of activities conducted in the class were taken solely from the textbook. In fact, while acknowledging the small sample size and limited time available for observations, although teachers reported in the survey that they used a variety of teaching materials, this was not observed in practice. Rondón, Jesús, Vera and Fernanda (2016) stressed that in EFL classrooms, secondary teaching materials are as important as the primary materials. Therefore, other teaching materials should also be used along with the main textbooks to facilitate English language learning.

Challenges such as the difficulty of explaining some western concepts, limited number of authentic language reinforcement activities, and inappropriate language level for the students to learn were reported to be common issues faced by teachers when using western-published ELT textbooks. Casta and Hufana (2016), Gak (2011) and Nasution (2016) confirmed that a number of foreign published textbooks have irrelevant language activities. They also pointed out that some of these materials do not match the linguistic level of the students. This is one of the most concerning findings of the present study as these textbooks are used as the primary teaching materials in EFL classes. Teachers are very dependent on the activities presented in the textbook. Therefore, if these materials do not cater to the linguistic level of the students and they do not provide authentic language practices, learning may not take place. Diniyah (2013) observed that activities presented in textbooks should be appropriate and relevant to the needs of the students. Materials which are relevant to the students can create a positive effect on their learning motivation; hence, learning can be achieved.

The findings presented in this present study clearly show that western-published textbooks play a significant role in Thai EFL classrooms. Although some teachers use some secondary teaching materials, textbooks are still the primary source for teachers for most classroom lessons and activities. However, given the limited number of non-native EFL teachers as participants and the context where this study was conducted, this study acknowledges its limitations. Thus, the results cannot be taken as representative of all non-native EFL teachers who are using western-published ELT textbooks in their EFL classrooms. Nevertheless, although the focus of this study was limited to non-native EFL teachers in Bangkok, the findings may have broader implications for other teachers who are using western-published ELT materials in their language teaching, not only in the Southeast Asia region, but in all parts of the world.

Conclusion

The role and importance of the use of textbooks in the classroom has been discussed extensively in the literature. This study has demonstrated that western-published English language teaching textbooks play a

key role in the EFL classrooms of Thailand. Non-native English-speaking teachers use these textbooks as their primary teaching material. Although the results highlighted a number of challenges, teachers were still positive towards using these textbooks in their EFL classrooms. Some of the reasons why teachers use these western-published textbooks include ease of preparation, reliable model language, and expert source of the language.

The challenges that were revealed from the study suggest that although these western-published textbooks are currently the primary source for language teaching in Thai EFL classrooms, teachers and the school administrators should try to develop and use their own language teaching materials that cater to the needs of their learners. Locally published ELT textbooks may offer a learning context that all students and teachers can relate to as local textbook writers already know the culture of the target learners. However, careful consideration as to the language focus and the language level should also be borne in mind. Nevertheless, given the confidence that local teachers currently place in “western experts”, it may be difficult to persuade teachers to utilize locally produced textbooks.

Future studies could investigate the effectiveness of western-published materials in promoting learning the English language in EFL classrooms. Other studies could concentrate on the students’ perceptions towards the use of foreign ELT materials in their classrooms. However, such studies would benefit from a bigger sample size and more classroom observations and interviews.

It is hoped that the results from this study may not only have implications for local teachers who are using western-published textbooks, but also have potential implications for other teachers who are confronted by the same issue in Southeast Asia and in all parts of the world.

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