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Using Web-application in Training to Enhance Oral English Proficiency of the Local Tour Guides in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to enhance oral English proficiency of the local tour guides in Southern Thailand by using a web-application. The web application which served local needs was designed and used as a tool to promote teaching speaking skills for the tour guides' training course. Quasi experimental research using one group pretest-posttest design was employed. The result shows that after attending the training course, oral English proficiency of the local tour guides significantly increased. Most of the tour guides were satisfied with the course and teaching practices which promoted oral English proficiency that can be adapted for ESP classes and training courses in other parts of Thailand and beyond.

Keywords: Web-application; Oral English proficiency; Tour guides

Introduction

Tourism is considered to be one of the world's largest service industries [1]. Developing tour guides' oral communication ability is particularly essential in promoting tourism in Thailand, where tourism is one of the main sources of income. Data from the Tourism Authority of Thailand shows a record of 32.59 million foreign tourists visited Thailand in year 2016 and the average income from tourism industries was generated at 733 billion baht ($20.8 billion) in the first quarter of year 2017. In tourism domain, tour guides are expected to be representatives of all destinations whom play a very crucial role with the tourists' satisfaction and re-visit intention [1]. A skillful tour guide is one of the key components of successful tourism industries. Thus, to enhance oral communication ability for the tour guides is necessary. At present, various kinds of technology devices are used to enhance language proficiency. Especially, for adult professionals, they need to be taught the specific-field language for an up-to date development over time.

English for specific purposes (ESP)

English for specific purposes (ESP) relates to language use based on the unique needs of the learners [2]. The focus of ESP is on communicative needs and practices for specific professionals or occupational groups [3] which respond to the demand for English and vocational context. To develop ESP courses, analyzing the specific needs for particular groups of learners is considered as an initial step. Need analysis involves the activities which aim to collect the information for curriculum or course development in order to meet the needs of the particular group of learners [4]. In relation to the hospitality industry, it is necessary to develop English proficiency with the tourism personnel for a career in global business environment.

Technology and English language learning

Technology has played a very crucial role in language teaching. There are various kinds of technologies that can be used in ESP courses from the past to the present, ranging from tape recorders, CD players, websites, mobile technology, and 3D virtual environments [5]. There are many benefits for using technologies in language teaching and learning. Digital technologies can be accessed easily and they are a part of everyday life for example, mobile apps can be used as a tool to enhance language proficiency because it provides plenty of learning sources; including language exercises and models of using language in real situations. Using various kinds of technology devices can help the learners to access to authentic language, for example; the learners can use mobile phones to listen to radio programs in English, to chat with friends from other countries, and send business e-mails in English. It is easy and convenient to learn English without the limitations of time and space [6]. Herlina [7] claimed that if the students are encouraged to chat with their friends in English, their English proficiency will improve. For those who live in the area where reading materials in target language, watching news, and authentic environment cannot be accessed easily, the Internet can provide authentic contexts and abundance of authentic oral models such as; songs, electronic books, video clips, which will help the learners to improve their pronunciation and learn new vocabularies [8]. Not only the learners, but the teachers as well can get benefits from the Internet, because the Internet can provide various tasks and exercises and can help to support the teachers who do not have confidence in their language skills. In conclusion, various types of technologies can be used in class as a tool to improve learners' English language proficiency. Thus, teachers should create learning environments which incorporate technological tools.

Research Design

This study is a quasi experimental research which is using a one group pretest-posttest design. 15 English speaking tour guides were taught to use the web-application named Songkhla Travel Guide and the web-application was used as a source of information about the tourist attractions in local areas. In class, the participants could practice speaking skills and use the web-application simultaneously. All of the participants were tour guides whom got their licenses to work in the area of Songkhla province and nearby provinces in Southern Thailand.

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The training course took 20 hours for learning in class and 3 hours for the field trip. The participants had to do a pretest and a posttest to assess their progress. The pretest and the posttest were oral tested, which derived the concept from Cambridge Preliminary English Tests. The test was evaluated by two raters composed of 1 native speaker and 1 Thai lecturer. The score was from the two raters whom combined and calculated to find out the average score. The scores of language proficiency were considered from the quality of language usage. The measurement was adapted from Common European Frameworks of References for Language, 2001 [9,10]. The inter-rater reliability was confirmed by using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient. The scores were set on pretests and posttests which were compared and analyzed by using Dependent t-test.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study consisted of several stages. Firstly, a web application which proposes local contexts and tourist attractions were established. The focus of this article is on teaching practices which aims to enhance oral English proficiency for tour guides and the web-application was used as a tool in the training course. Thus, the process of doing need analysis to investigate the needs of the local tour guides, creating focus groups to consider the most suitable content, until getting the complete web application are not illustrated in details. The web-application used in this study was named the Songkhla Travel Guide. The first page illustrates a menu for the visitors to register and sign in to view the details (Figure 1).

The main menu under the topic of functional interaction consists of 6 sub-topics; self-introduction/meeting tourists, welcoming and saying goodbye at the airport/bus or train station, describing hotel's facilities, coping with emergencies, dealing with complaints, and talking about illness and first aid. The viewers can choose to read by interest. The details of each topic provided dialogues, useful expressions, and vocabularies which were used in each situation (Figure 2).

Under the menu of functional interaction, there are names of 7 sub-districts in Songkhla province. If the viewers click on the name of a sub-district, the list of the tourist attractions will be shown. The viewers can click on the button to read the details of the tourist attractions. The contents include the history of the place, features, facilities, dialogues and useful phrases, cultural tips, information about opening times, contact details, ticket prices, and maps. Additionally, the viewers can click on the speaker symbol to listen to the dialogue and the contents under each topic while reading the texts (Figure 3).

Secondly, before the training course, the teaching plans which focused on speaking skills were established. The teaching plans covered 13 topics selected from 44 topics in the web-application. These 13 topics were considered from 1) the popularity among the tourists, 2) the variety of the contexts ranging from natural attractions, religious places, museums, floating markets, and so on, and 3) the new places of interest for tourist attraction. The teaching plans were divided into 3 parts; pre-teaching, reading comprehension and role plays.

Regarding the pre-teaching stage, pictures of local tourist attractions were shown to the participants and they were asked about general information on the places in order to evaluate their background knowledge. For example; What is the name of this place? Where is it? Have you ever been there? Do you like the place? Why and why not? In the stage of reading comprehension, the aim of this stage was to give the participants information about the local tourist attractions. The participants were asked to read and find out the information from the web-application. After reading, they were asked questions to check their understanding, practice speaking skills and pronunciation. For example (Figure 4);

In the last stage, the participants were asked to do role plays. The situations for the role plays were close to the real communication of their work. The conversations were mostly between the tourists and the tour guides. The participants had to use the information from the web-application to create the dialogues. For example (Figure 5);

After finishing the course, a semi-structure interview was employed to investigate the satisfaction for the training course, recommendations for improving the web-application, and problems they have in using the web-application.
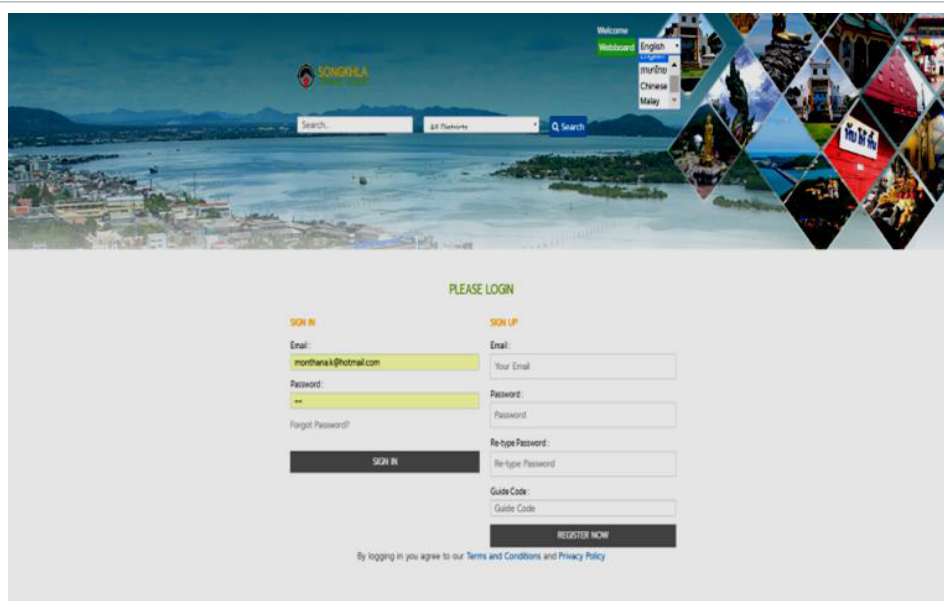

Figure 1: First page of the web-application.

Figure 2: The content list for the topic of functional interaction.

Figure 3: The content list for each tourist attraction.

Figure 4: Example-1.

Figure 5: Example-2.

Findings

Results from pretest – posttest design

The results from the study revealed that before attending the training course, the participants showed a level of knowledge in local tourist attractions at 4.30. After the course their knowledge in local tourist attraction was raised to 14.37 (total score=30). The oral English proficiency of the participants increased from 1.00 to 2.08. Regarding the additional score, the participants got 1.60 scores for the posttest. It significantly increased in the 0.01level compared to the scores before training that the participants did not ge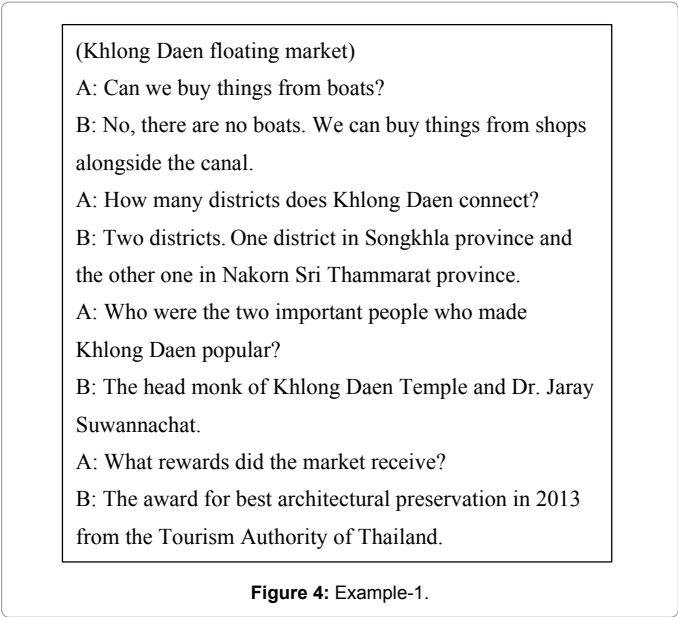t any additional score in the oral test. The comparison between the scores from pretest and posttest are illustrated in Table 1.
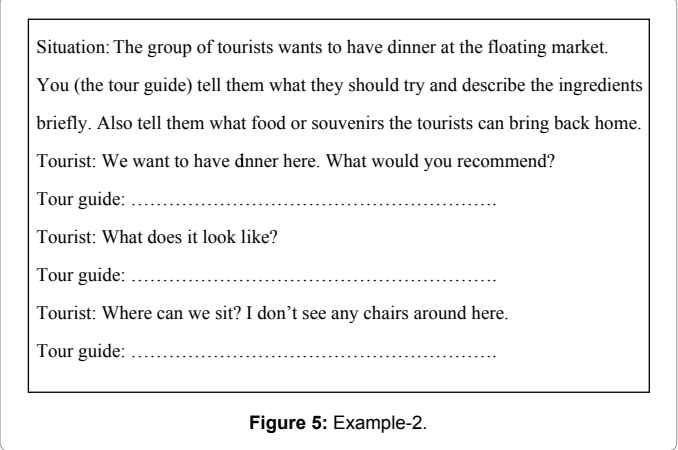
	Score	Pretest		Posttest		t	df	p
		$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$	S.D.			
Knowledge in local tourist attractions								
1. Model of Shwedagon pagoda	6	0.07	0.26	1.87	1.16	6.65	14	0.00
2. Reclining Buddha, Laemphor temple	6	1.07	0.84	2.90	1.15	6.20	14	0.00
3. Deenul Islam mosque, Songkhla	6	1.63	1.19	3.57	1.07	4.81	14	0.00
4. Songkhla style stew	6	1.17	0.94	3.33	2.21	3.37	14	0.00
5. Sunn Hemp Blossom Festival	6	0.37	0.55	2.70	1.10	6.79	14	0.00
(1) **Mean score**	30	4.30	2.41	14.37	5.10	7.99	14	0.00
Language proficiency								
1. Pronunciation	5	1.00	0.00	2.33	1.05	4.93	14	0.00
2. Vocabularies	5	1.00	0.00	1.93	0.88	4.09	14	0.00
3. Communicative skills	5	1.00	0.00	2.07	0.80	5.17	14	0.00
4. Appropriateness in social interactions	5	1.00	0.00	2.00	0.78	4.97	14	0.00
(2) **Mean score**	5	1.00	0.00	2.08	0.82	5.10	14	0.00
Additional score								
1. Reclining Buddha, Laemphor temple		0.00	0.00	0.63	0.55	4.46	14	0.00
2. Deenul Islam mosque, Songkhla		0.00	0.00	0.37	0.61	2.32	14	0.04
3. Songkhla style stew		0.00	0.00	0.20	0.37	2.10	14	0.05
4. Sunn Hemp Blossom Festival		0.00	0.00	0.40	0.63	2.45	14	0.03
(3) **Mean score**		0.00	0.00	1.60	1.50	4.12	14	0.00

Table 1: Comparison of the scores between pretest and posttest.

Results from the interview

The result from the interview revealed that the major problem for the tourist guides in their work was about lacking knowledge about local tourist attractions, especially the historical information, important people of history, and vocabularies used in describing places. On the other hand, the local tourist guides got the information from various sources which provided little differences in details of the same place. It makes the tour guides have a lack of confidence to tell the information to the tourists. Furthermore, they lack the knowledge about Thai culture especially in Thai architectural style. Thus, it is very hard for them to tell the tourists about beliefs, values, and behaviors in Thai culture.

Regarding the opinions towards using the web-application in the training course, most of the participants agreed that they got great benefit from the web-application because their gain of knowledge about the legends of the places, historical information, and useful hints and ideas that they can tell to the tourists. It is very convenient for them to prepare the scripts before working, because they can access the web-application anywhere and anytime. Additionally, they got a valuable experience from the field trip, because it helps to expand their visions and can inspire them to transfer the knowledge to the tourists.

On the other hand, there are some suggestions from the participants for web-application improvement; 1) the button Back and Next should be added in order to be easier for the viewers to return back to the previous page and forward to the next page of the web-application; 2) the button pause, forward, and rewind should be added because it will be more convenient for them when they listen to the sound of the scripts; and 3) The contents in the web-application should be expanded to other parts of Southern Thailand.

Discussion

The results from this study illustrated that web-application which can help to enhance the oral English proficiency of local tour guides. There are many studies which support the important role of technology devices in ESP classes [7]. Technology can be used to foster vocabulary learning, oral proficiency, reading skills, and so on. Kim [6] supported the role of web applications which can be used to improve listening skills in a foreign language classroom and the learners can take advantages of using mobile apps to learn English in their spare time. Thus, the teachers can choose the appropriate technology devices which suit to their classroom environments and integrate in their teaching practices.

Conclusion

In this modern world, English language learners can get benefit from using technology to enhance their language proficiency and web-application is one of the tools which can be used in ESP classes. It is easy and convenient for the learners to access web-applications on computers, mobile phones, and iPad. The result from this study revealed that web application can help to enhance the oral English proficiency of the local tour guides in Southern part of Thailand and can help to increase their knowledge about the local tourist attractions, historical information, and Thai culture.

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