

DEVELOPING AN ENGLISH CURRICULUM FOR LOCAL GUIDES: A Case Study of Ram Dang Community, Thailand

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Abstract— This study aimed at designing and developing an English curriculum for volunteer local guides in Ram Dang community in Songkhla, southern Thailand; and investigating the opinions of the participants on the designed curriculum. The research process consisted of 4 phases: a survey of local needs and contextual information, curriculum design and development, the designed curriculum implementation, and the curriculum evaluation. Data were generated from 30 officials and residents, and 50 students living in Ram Dang community, and by means of focus group interviews, observations, pre-test and post-test, document collection, and sets of questionnaires. The study resulted in a designed curriculum, two five-day training programs, and two learning materials: English Handbook for Guides in Ram Dang context and Manual for Being a Good Host. The study also indicated that after the training sessions, the assessment of the participants' performance and learning progress was shown at a highly satisfactory level. Further, the average of the participants' opinions on the curriculum was at a highly satisfactory level. However, this research suggests that English language training based on the designed curriculum should be frequently organized for the local guides and follow-up programs should be held.

Keywords- English curriculum; volunteer guides

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry and has played a vital role in socio-economic and political development worldwide. It does not only enhance an increase in employment opportunities, but it also contributes to a broader cultural understanding of the destination countries, raising awareness and developing respect for cultural diversity and people's way of life.

Nowadays, tourism is a key industry that generates a great number of incomes and leads to economic growth of Thailand. In response to the development of Thailand's tourism, there are more types of tourism including cultural tourism, sustainable tourism, ecotourism and experiential tourism introduced to local communities (TAT 2012). Thus, it is unavoidable for the locals to have knowledge and professional skills of tour guides, and language skills. As Boonyawatana

(2009) points out, English language is one of the most important languages for tourism. Further, Prachanant (2012, pp. 118) suggests that Thai people closely involved in the areas of the hospitality industry should develop their English skills.

II. THE CONTEXT

A. Ram Dang Community

Ram Dang community is located in the area of Songkhla Lake Basin of Songkhla province in southern Thailand. With its population of 2,339, most of the residents are agriculturists, officials and workers.

Based on the sustainable concept and with its abundant resources and natural charm, in 2011 the community embarked on the policy of ecotourism management to support the future sustainability of the local population, and has developed itself to be a model of a learning community. This has granted tourists' access to its local cultures, as well as more opportunities of participation in distinct activities relating to Ram Dang community's identity. At the same time, it involves local population in providing tourism services to visitors.

B. Four Learning Bases of Ram Dang Community

In response to the policy, the community has established four learning bases as follows: Learning Base 1 is located at Ram Dang administrative office. It is the Visitor Center that provides visitors with Ram Dang's history, and geographical, societal and economic information. Learning Base 2 offers information about local wisdom of how to make use of palm trees, and to process palm sugar, whereas Learning Base 3 at Miss Ubon's house is constructed from local materials including bamboo and many parts of palm trees. Being considered the most perfect model house in Songkhla Lake Basin style, the house was awarded by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The last learning base is Ram Dang Kitchen: Good Food Good Health. The kitchen offers ten kinds of food cooked from local ingredients. All kinds of the food reflect outstanding identity and the healthy diet of Ram Dang people.

The location map of the four learning bases is presented in the following figure.



Figure 1. Location Map of the Four Learning Bases

When tourism in Ram Dang community is operated, there is intercultural services interface between visitors and the locals. When current tourism encourages more involvement of the locals; thus, it is inevitable for the locals to have knowledge of being good hosts, and the information about Ram Dang context, and language skills of tour guides. Consequently, the development of foreign language skills amongst the relevant Ram Dang community members to fulfill the job would be a matter of course. As Prachanant (2012) points out, English has become highly important to be used to communicate with foreign tourists. Thus, it is necessary that an English curriculum for local guides should be developed based on the real needs of the community and its context.

The idea of developing English skills of the local guides of Ram Dang community led to the inspiration of this research. This study therefore attempted to design an English curriculum for local volunteer guides in Ram Dang community, and to investigate the opinions of the trainee guides on the effectiveness of the designed curriculum.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research was carried out at Ram Dang community in 2013. Data were generated from two groups of participants living in Ram Dang community. The first group was 14 officials and 16 residents (hereafter adult guides), and the second was 50 students (hereafter young guides).

Data were generated through focus group interviews, observation of the two training programs, participants' pretest and posttest, document collection, as well as sets of

questionnaires. Data were analyzed by means of t-test, percentage and mean.

The research consisted of 4 phases: surveying the information for the contextual needs analysis, designing and developing an English curriculum for local guides, implementing the designed curriculum, and evaluating the curriculum.

Data from a survey and contextual needs analysis in the first phase was recorded as data base used for designing an English curriculum for Ram Dang local guides and two course materials were developed in the second phase. Further, two training programs were set in the curriculum implementation phase: one was held for adult guides and the second for young guides. The training courses were conducted inside classrooms and at each learning base. Further, the assessment was divided into two types: individual post-test, and oral presentation that was assessed by invited assessors when the participants worked in group guiding visitors to each learning base. In the evaluation phase, the participants answered course evaluation questionnaires asking about their opinions on the designed curriculum.

IV. RESULTS

The analysis of data is presented in the following.

A. The Community Needs Analysis

The results of the community needs analysis revealed that the locals in Ram Dang community perceived knowledge for tour guides and English skill development as necessity at a high-rated level ($\bar{X} = 4.03$). The qualitative data revealed that English would increase its importance when tourism in Ram Dang community was operated. However, the participants believed that it was not possible for them to improve their English within a short period because most of their English proficiency was ranging from a poor level to a fair level. However, the initiative for the development of the English curriculum would encourage the community to develop itself to be an effective learning community.

B. The Designed English Curriculum for Local Guides

This study resulted in a designed English curriculum. The objectives of the curriculum were to develop the English skills in combination with contextual knowledge of local guides in Ram Dang community. It comprised 14 lesson plans including engaging sources, activities, discussion questions, and assessments. The content covered information relevant to Ram Dang context and the knowledge management incorporated in the four learning bases of the community.

The effectiveness of the curriculum was evaluated by the participants in both groups into 5 aspects: content, learning materials, learning activities, instruction media, lesson duration and assessment. As a whole, the designed curriculum was evaluated at a highly satisfactory level ($\bar{X} = 4.75$). When considering the individual aspects, the analysis was shown as follows:

1) *Content of the designed curriculum*

The content incorporated in the designed curriculum covered four aspects namely, basic knowledge for local guides, English pronunciation, English for everyday use and English for guiding visitors at the four learning bases. As a whole, the evaluation of the content by both groups of the participants was at the highest level (\bar{X} = 4.13). However, the participants commented that to learn the content effectively, there should be more time allocated for practicing English pronunciation and English for everyday use.

2) *Course materials*

To implement the designed curriculum, two sets of material to be used in the two training courses were developed: one was Handbook of English for Guides in Ram Dang Context, and the other was Manual for Being a Good Host.

a) *Handbook of English for Guides in Ram Dang Context*

Handbook of English for Guides in Ram Dang Context (as shown in Fig. 1) was written and used as a learning material for all participants to do self-study as well as teaching material during the training programs. The handbook comprised three sections. The first section was pronunciation tips. The second provided readers with vocabulary and expressions used to explain about Ram Dang context and the four learning bases, and the last was English for Everyday Use.



Figure 2. Handbook of English for Guides in Ram Dang Context

b) *Manual for Being a Good Host*

Manual for Being a Good Host (as presented in Fig. 3) was produced in the Thai language for giving guidelines to the participants to provide quality services to visitors. Its first part described good host's roles, characteristics, responsibility and morale, and the second offered information such as methods of reception, techniques for giving impressive services, and arts of hospitality.



Figure 3. Manual for Being a Good Host

The findings indicated that the two course materials were considered useful and practical, and were evaluated at the highest satisfactory level. The participants of both groups evaluated the two course materials at the highest level (\bar{X} = 4.75). When the individual material was considered, the Handbook of English for Guides in Ram Dang Context was at the highest level (\bar{X} = 4.70). Further, the average level of evaluation on the Manual for Being a Good Host was at the highest level (\bar{X} = 4.80). In addition, the qualitative data reflected that the majority of the participants perceived the content containing in the two materials as useful and practical because all important information related to their local context were incorporated in the materials. The language was easy to understand with appropriate design and size. However, they commented that there should be more vocabulary and expressions introduced for more practices in the English Handbook.

c) *Learning Activities*

The majority of the participants in the two training programs agreed that the learning activities enhanced better knowledge in English, awareness of the importance of Ram Dang culture, resources and identity. As mentioned, two types of activities organized: in-class and on-site activities that the participants used English to guide visitors to the learning bases. The results revealed that the participants evaluated both in-class and on-site activities at the highest level (\bar{X} = 4.12). However, the average evaluation of the activities done at the learning bases was slightly higher than the ones happening in the classrooms.

d) *Lesson Duration, Instruction Media and Assessment Methods*

The analysis indicated that the lesson duration, instruction media and assessment method used in the training sessions were evaluated at the highest level (\bar{X} = 4.06, 4.06 and 4.07 respectively).

Moreover, the data from focus group interviews revealed that both groups of the participants considered the training programs set in the curriculum were useful and practical. The content was relevant to Ram Dang context. Most of them felt impressed with every trainer who had well-prepared lessons with enjoyable activities. Although the assessment methods were difficult, especially the oral assessment of guiding visitors to each learning base, the participants felt it challenging and practical. At the end of the training course, they thought they had more confidence in speaking English and expected to participate in similar courses in the future.

3) *Assessments of Participants' Performance*

The participants' performance was assessed according to four learning aspects: Basic knowledge for local guides, English pronunciation, English for everyday use and English for guiding visitors at the four learning bases. The research results revealed that the average score of the students after the training was significantly higher than that of the pre-training ($p < .05$).

C. *The Issues*

The qualitative data indicated that 78% of the participants considered the designed curriculum appropriate to be used for developing English skills of Ram Dang guides. The curriculum was adapted to suit Ram Dang context. They agreed that every step of the learning process was practical and useful. However, there were issues that need to take into consideration. First, most of the participants commented that the two training programs were intensive. They thought that time for trainings was too limited that could cause difficulties to the participants whose English skills were at a very basic level. Second, varied levels of English ability of the individual participants led to the difficulties in organizing learning activities. Data indicated that 60% of the adult group had very limited English abilities while 37% had fair command of English. Only 3% was good at English. Furthermore, the young group seemed to have higher English proficiency than the former group did. It was observed that the majority of the adult participants of low English proficiency spent more time on completing the assigned tasks, and some could finish them in time, whereas the ones of better English skills finished the jobs within a short period of time.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *The Importance of Community Needs Analysis*

Needs analysis is recognized as a key element that can be a channel that informs curriculum developers of levels and areas of community needs and wants of (Nunan & Lamb 2001). Thus, it was the important source that could help to appropriately determine which content, materials, activities and assessment should be incorporated in the curriculum. Further, ongoing needs analysis can be used as a reference for revising and adjusting the existing curriculum design for the next cycle of curriculum management.

B. *The Effectiveness of Curriculum Design and Development*

According to Taba's (1973) principles of curriculum design, designing a curriculum is based on five elements: content, learning activities, instruction media, lesson duration and assessment. Further, a curriculum designed for a specific context should respond to the specific local needs (Thammawithee 2009). The findings from this research led to the argument of how the elements play crucial roles in enhancing the effectiveness of the curriculum as discussed in the following.

1) *Content in Context*

Content in context was the most important element for designing and developing an English curriculum for local guides and contributed to the effectiveness of the designed curriculum. Although all four aspects of the content incorporated in the curriculum were evaluated at the highest level, English for guiding visitors at the four learning bases was considered the most important element of the curriculum due to its direct relevance to the context that would be mostly and frequently used when the local guides gave services to visitors. This is consistent with Bax's (2003, p.284) suggestion

that 'context is the very first thing to be taken into account'. Moreover, Doughty and Pica (1986) point out that content provided in context can encourage active involvement that boosts language learners' acquisition better than teacher-directed activities.

2) *Design and Choice of Course Materials*

Design and choice of course materials were important elements to be taken into consideration when designing a curriculum. To develop specific skills and knowledge for local guides in a specific context including Ram Dang community, the content of the course materials must cover content that equips the locals with sufficient knowledge to be a good guide, and appropriate English language in relevance to the contextual information should be added. This is because practical content and realistic language can be used in daily life (Galloway 1993). In addition, design and choice of learning materials should be based on resource availability and learners' language skills (McDonough, Shaw & Masuhara 2013). In response to the stated concept, most of the content in course materials needs to be designed by curriculum developers, although some parts can be selected from commercial textbooks.

3) *Hands-on Activities and Teaching Media*

Hands-on activities are considered an effective element of a curriculum for language learning. Most of the activities done at the learning bases were evaluated at a slightly higher level than of the ones happening in the classrooms. Doing such hands-on activities provided participants with more opportunities to be exposed to the authentic use of the target language in authentic contexts for authentic purposes and thus achieve "real" authenticity (Ozvire & Herrington 2011). Stoddart et al. (2002) also support that hands-on activities increase learners' interaction.

Moreover, there was evidence that various teaching media used in this curriculum together with the learning activities resulted in higher post-test scores. As Cohen and Ball (1999) point out, instructional materials can mediate students' engagement with the content to be learned. This can be seen that the participants' satisfaction with the instruction media was at the highest level.

4) *Authentic assessments*

Authentic assessments can contribute to the observable progress of the participants. Use of such assessments including classroom oral presentations and performance of guiding visitors to each learning base can engage participants in being effective performers with acquired knowledge and learning experiences (Darling-Hammond & Snyder 2000). It also provides trainers and community members with directly observable products and understandable evidence concerning the participants' performance. In turn, the participants gain more opportunities to display what they actually know and apply what they know in practice in real world contexts (Khaira & Yambo 2005).

C. *The Issues*

Diverse levels of language proficiency have become problems in language classrooms. It seems to be more difficult when the lessons must be taught intensively. However, to

positively address the issues, Genesee (1999) suggests that various teaching approaches and techniques should be appropriately employed. Moreover, to help the locals as trainee guides develop their language skills, authentic learning activities should be adjusted to match the level of the individual learners' proficiency (Long 1997). The effective use of authentic language activities will enhance influential potency to motivate learners to higher levels of language proficiency, and increase self-confidence, and in turns, this will result in motivation and success (Stryker & Leaver 1997). Further, the training courses should be frequently re-organized and follow-up programs should be set for evaluating whether the knowledge gained from the training courses are used in the real world situations.

VI. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, this research study brought about the designed English curriculum for local guides, and two courses materials: English Handbook for Guides in Ram Dang context and Manual for Being a Good Host. The effectiveness of the curriculum was rated at the highest level, while the two course materials were evaluated at a highly satisfactory level. Furthermore, it was found that the effectiveness of the designed curriculum was fostered according to the design and development of some crucial elements, namely incorporating content in context, designing and selecting appropriate course materials, employing hands-on activities and various teaching media, and using authentic assessments. Therefore, the results of this research leads to a summary that this research can be used as a guideline for other English curriculum development as well as professional development of other contexts.

This research suggests that more frequent English language trainings should be organized for the local guides. There should also be placement test to group participants of different abilities. In addition, there should be follow-up programs in order to evaluate the progress of the local guides in the future.

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