
Acquisition Activities in the English Class for Thai Students

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This paper aims at reporting the application of the Natural Approach in teaching English to Thai students. The rationale of the approach will first be introduced. Then, its implications for developing acquisition activities in the classroom will be dealt with. An illustration of the activities used with Thai students will finally be presented.

Rationale

There are many approaches in language teaching which aim at helping the learners be able to use the language. Some of them focus on the surface aspects of language while others look at the gist of language learning. Recently, Krashen and Terrell (1983) introduced the Natural Approach. The theory behind this approach is that acquisition or the ability to use language for real communication is the focus of language teaching. Acquisition, according to Krashen (1982: 10), is "a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication." In Krashen's view, acquisition can occur if the acquirer is provided with either sufficient comprehensible input or the input that he can understand and his affective filters are down. This means that the acquirer is willing or motivated to be exposed to the provided input.

Oller (1983: 12) further states that the acquirer will utilize the input if it is related to his contexts of experience. In addition, he points out that the text must be episodically organized: "text (i.e. discourse in any form) will be easier to produce, understand, and recall to the extent that it is motivated and structured episodically." Similarly, Widdowson (1983) states that to achieve communicative purposes, "naturalistic textual data" have to be supplied.

Implications

From the viewpoints of the theorists mentioned above, it is reasonable to draw the following implications in language teaching:

1. *Goal of language teaching.* Communication should be the goal of language teaching. To help the learners acquire English, they must be exposed to genuine communicative situations. This type of exposure will provide them with comprehensible input.

2. *Materials.* The materials should focus on meaning and the learner's knowledge of the world rather than on form. They should be used to help students engage in communicative events.

3. *Teaching strategies.* Teaching strategies should focus on acquisition activities and provide interactions among language users. Techniques which help lower affective filters should be encouraged.

To develop acquisition activities which focus on meaning and motivate the students, materials have to correspond with the goal of teaching and serve the students' needs and interests. According to research on the relationships between interest in reading topics and learner variables in language achievement of Chulalongkorn University first year students by Prapphal et al. (1983), it was found that Political Science students showed high reading interest in current political issues. To find materials which were authentic and could prepare the students to use the language in the real world, I decided to select excerpts from English newspapers. The criteria for selecting the materials proposed by Oller (1983: 3) were used as guidelines. He suggested the following points.

1. Use motivated text with significant conflicts in the pursuit of meaningful goals;
2. Seek out stageable action;
3. Respect the logic of experience;
4. First establish the facts;
5. Break the text down into manageable chunks; and
6. Make multiple passes through the text, deepening comprehension on each pass.

With these guidelines in mind and considering the time constraint, I came up with 5 lessons as outlined below.

General Elections in Thailand

Episode 1: Campaigns

Episode 2: Voting

Episode 3: The Prime Minister and the Cabinet

Episode 4: Government Policies

Episode 5: The Opposition Party

The lessons were episodically organized in a natural way and served the students' needs and interests. Although such authentic materials might be a little too difficult for them, with the help of instructors acting as facilitators and with the students' experience as well as their knowledge of the world, the lessons appeared to be comprehensible.

Illustration of Acquisition Activities

To facilitate the teaching and learning process as well as to provide a relaxing atmosphere in the classroom, acquisition activities were developed. Krashen and Terrell (1983) introduced the following types of activities:

1. Affective-humanistic activities
2. Problem-solving activities
3. Games
4. Content activities

These activities were used in the lessons. For example,

1. Affective-Humanistic Activities

a. Preference ranking (Episode 1: "Campaigns")

The teacher asks the students to show their favorite political parties. They must rank the responses according to their own preferences.

My favorite political party is:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social Action | <input type="checkbox"/> Prachakorn Thai |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chart Thai | <input type="checkbox"/> Progressive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Democrat | <input type="checkbox"/> Free People |

b. *Revealing information about yourself* (Episode 2: "Voting") The teacher asks questions about the students' information and opinions such as:

- At what age can you vote?
- Are you eligible to vote?
- If you have the right to vote, who will you vote for?
- Why?
- Who has had experience in voting?
- What did you do on election day?
- etc.

c. *Activities using the imagination* (Episode 4: "Government Policies")

The teacher asks the students to imagine that they were appointed Interior Minister. In this situation, what would they do?

2. Problem-Solving Activities

a. *Tasks and series* (Episode 2: "Voting")

After the teacher introduces the new vocabulary necessary to do the task, the students are divided into small groups. They are asked to put the sequence of events into the correct order. If the order is not correct, the teacher explains the relationships between sentences and cohesive devices such as markers of sequences.

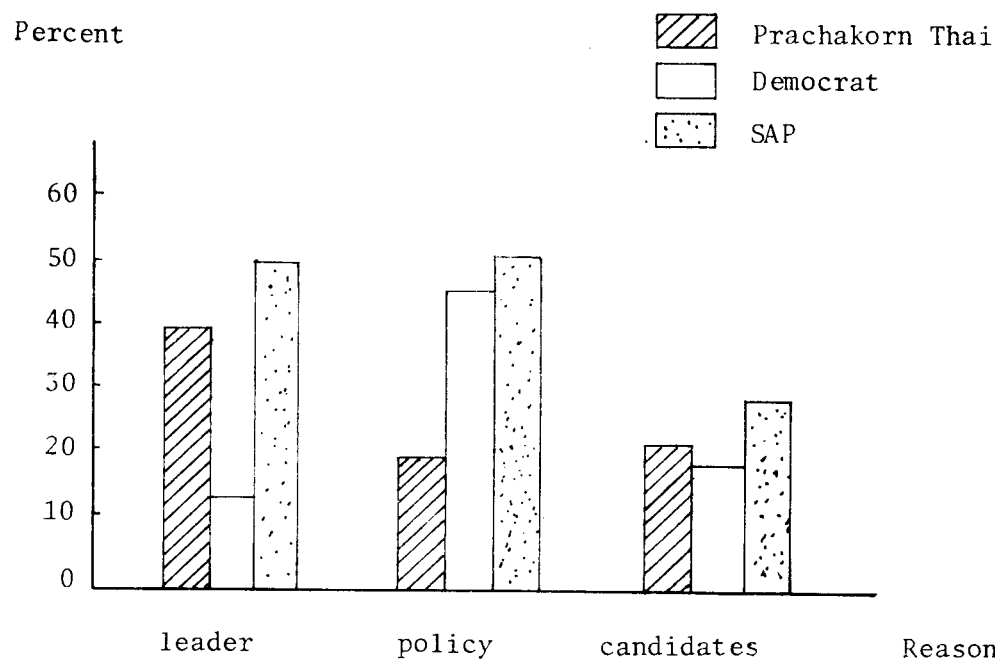
Example :

Steps in Voting

- a. Present your ID card to the election official before receiving a voting card.
- b. Give your voting card to an election official who will drop it into a ballot box.
- c. First, check your name on the list of eligible voters at the district.
- d. Next, check a voter registration list before voting at a polling booth.
- e. On election day go to the polling station in your constituency.
- f. Finally, step out from the polling station.
- g. Then, report any problems to officials at least seven days before the election.
- h. Then, head for a booth and mark an X beside the number of the candidate you vote for on the voting card.

b. *Charts, graphs and maps* (Episode 1: "Campaigns")

The teacher asks the students to draw graphs to show the statistics of voters' opinions based on the information in the reading passage.



3. Games (Episode 4: "Government Policies")

Finding your Ministry

After having read a text, give each student a sentence written on a slip of paper which states a policy of each ministry. Ask him to read his own sentence silently. After that he has to question other students in order to decide who belongs to the same ministry. Tell the class that there are some sentences that do not state the ministry policies. Those who have the irrelevant sentences should group together.

Ask each group to choose a leader and let him introduce the members of the group.

4. Content Activities (optional)

a. Individual reports (Episode 1: "Campaigns")

Ask the students to compare Thai and foreign political campaigns, e.g. Japanese, American, British. They can get the information from satellite news, newspapers, etc.

b. Discussion (Episode 5: "The Opposition Party")

Discuss the duties of the opposition party.

The activities mentioned above seem to work well with Political Science students as indicated by an informal evaluation. 80.99% of the students who returned the observation checklist showed that the episodically organized lessons were useful, interesting, comprehensible, clear, sufficient, and usable in real situations. Although the lessons are in the experimental stage and need to be improved, I am satisfied with what I have done. As a language teacher, I have given the students opportunities to be exposed to language that they can use in the real world.

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Note

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