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## A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO TEACHING EXPERIENCES: TEACHING STRATEGY CHALLENGES IN NARATHIWAT THAILAND

by

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### Abstract:

*This study aims to discover the experiences of 2 English teachers regarding challenges and how to deal with them who do not have a background in English education at Witthayathan Islamic School. The method used was narrative inquiry with qualitative research method. Data were obtained through structured interviews with two participant teachers. The results of the analysis showed two themes in the stories told by the two teachers, namely the challenges of teachers when teaching in Thailand, such as teachers who are not English graduates, differences in language structure, and lack of student motivation when learning, as well as teachers' strategies in teaching English by using varied methods such as memorizing ten vocabulary, playing games, reading and speaking exercises to improve students' abilities.*

*Keywords: English teachers; challenges and strategies; teacher experiences;*

### Abstrak:

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengalaman 2 orang guru bahasa Inggris mengenai tantangan dan bagaimana cara menghadapinya yang tidak memiliki latar belakang pendidikan bahasa Inggris di Witthayathan Islamic School. Metode yang digunakan adalah inkuiri naratif dengan metode penelitian kualitatif. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara terstruktur terstruktur dengan dua orang guru yang menjadi partisipan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan dua tema dalam cerita yang disampaikan oleh kedua guru tersebut, yaitu tantangan guru ketika mengajar di Thailand seperti guru yang bukan lulusan bahasa Inggris, perbedaan struktur bahasa, dan kurangnya motivasi siswa ketika belajar, serta strategi motivasi siswa ketika belajar, serta strategi guru dalam mengajar bahasa Inggris dengan menggunakan metode yang bervariasi seperti menghafal 10 kosakata, bermain game, membaca dan berbicara latihan-latihan untuk meningkatkan kemampuan siswa.*

*Kata kunci: Guru bahasa Inggris, guru pengalaman, tantangan dan strategi*

## INTRODUCTION

Today, society is entering the era of Globalization; technology is increasingly sophisticated and rapidly developing. According to scholars (Budimir, 2011), Globalization is related to

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various factors, such as the development of technology, science, communication, and others, and it affects changes in various aspects of people's lives. One is the use of language, especially English, which is affected. Language is a process that can be used to communicate through interaction, collaboration, and good conversation. Another is the demand to publish scholarly manuscripts in the Industrial Revolution 4.0 as a dissemination tool for world audiences (Turmudi, 2020). We can use language to communicate, convey information in the form of facts and knowledge, explain things, and relate to social relationships. This shows that language allows us to express ideas, emotions, or information through communication.

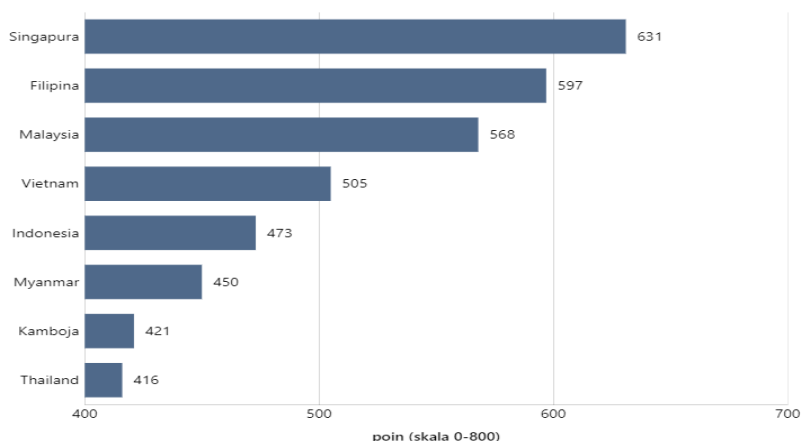
In this modern era, English is an international language essential to learning. According to Tamrin and Yanti (2019), English as a lingua franca is the most important foreign language to master because it has the most speakers. Speaking English well and fluently has become a mandatory learning and a necessity for everyone in this era of Globalization (Maitra, 2023). Dewi (2020) states that the influence of English is significant. English dominates communication in this modern era and is an essential communication tool. English has become a global language in various fields, including education, business, and tourism. English has now become a necessity that must be owned, primarily because it has dominated the era of Globalization (Widyastri, 2019). Everyone worldwide needs to understand and learn English because English plays various important roles in all fields. In an era where everyone competes, competitive English skills are a means of self-development and intellectual improvement and an added value for individuals.

According to Stiglitz (2002), no country can avoid Globalization. As a result, all countries will be involved in global power relations, whether they like it or not. Based on these opinions, it can be concluded that in this era of Globalization, students must learn and master English to participate in global competition. (Noerhidaya & Rintaningrum, 2018). As one of the ASEAN member countries, the Thai government understands the importance of English in integrating into the ASEAN economic community. Mastery of English is needed in various fields, including business, education, tourism, and, of course, for the future and Globalization, especially in job competition (Zainuddin, 2023). In Thailand, the official language is Thai, and English is a foreign language. Previous and current governments have also made English a subject.

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English is a compulsory subject at all levels of education, from primary to higher education, and allocates a budget to support various types of language-related projects using English. English is used in educational institutions, schools, and universities (Tipprachaban, 2022). However, in reality, Thailand has the lowest level of English proficiency in Southeast Asia. As shown in the graph below:

Table 1: English Proficiency Index



(Source: EF EPI)

English Language Proficiency Index According to Education First's (EF) English Language Proficiency Index (EPI) for 2023, Singapore has the largest English-speaking population in Southeast Asia. The country is also ranked 2nd in the world with an EPI 2023 score of 631 points. The maximum score for the EF set is 800, which includes very high (600-800 points), high (550-599), medium (500-550), low (450-499), and very low (<450). Cambodia is in the second deficient category, with a score of 421, and Thailand is the lowest among all countries, with a score of 416. This concern is heightened as annual reports from international education agencies, such as Educational Testing Service (ETS) and Education First (EF), show the low level of English proficiency of test takers. In the ETS report, Thailand consistently ranked among the poorest performing countries (2012-2017) on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC); its average score was low on listening but much lower on reading. Education First (2020) also reported shallow English proficiency levels of Thai EFL students from 2011 to 2016 and 2019 to 2020. In 2020, the average score of Thai EFL students ranked twentieth out of 24 Asian countries (Apridayani, 2023). This is due to placing English as a foreign language in learning.

*Firdausyiah and Islam (2024)*

Consequently, English is used passively. Participants only use English when there is English material when interacting with foreigners and when there are international-scale activities (Widyastuti et al., 2021). Of course, this dramatically impacts teachers' challenges when teaching Thai students. The researcher also felt this when conducting research at the Islamic Witthayathan School in Narathiwat, Thailand. The English teachers at the school were not graduates of the English bachelor's degree at the time of their education but graduates of different study programs. When viewed from the teacher's educational background, this is an enormous challenge that the teacher will experience. According to Nurlaeli and Saryono (2018), teachers are the main factor in the education system, especially in schools, and teacher performance is very important to create quality learning to achieve goals.

According to Thonginkam (2023), most Thais do not need to learn English. "Other than the English that schools require students to learn, there is no other need for students to strive to come into contact with or master English" (Thonginkam, 2023). This kind of thinking leads to a lack of motivation to learn English. Consequently, this is also caused by students' lack of attention in following the teaching and learning process and having a passive habit when receiving material the teacher delivers. In addition, teachers who use the same method every time they teach can cause students' lack of interest and low learning outcomes in participating in learning activities.

Another challenge in learning English at this school is the difference in language structure. English has a different structure from Thai, the mother tongue of most Thais. Using the processability theory, the acquisition of English as a foreign or second language can be analyzed in stages. According to this theory, a learner will not produce a language that he or she has not been able to master (Pienemann, 2005). In other words, the learner will follow the stages of language development and will not jump over the stages.

There are relevant previous studies on the challenges of English language teaching strategies, including research conducted by Sari (2020), which discusses the challenges and strategies of PPL students while teaching in Southern Thailand. The findings showed that English PPL students faced four challenges when teaching and learning in Southern Thailand. Namely, 1) The challenge of speaking Thai, 2) Lesson planning, 3) The length of the learning process, and 4) The lack of learning. Sari (2021) discusses the challenges

teachers and prospective teachers face in teaching English during teaching practice in Thailand. The conclusion of this study is that there are six classroom management challenges and solutions faced by prospective teachers when teaching international practicum, namely: (1) helping to balance teacher and student conversations, (2) difficulties in using clear instructions, (3) English language difficulties (4) difficulties in questioning techniques and (5) difficulties in teaching students with diverse abilities. Based on the research that has been conducted, a research gap was found, namely the absence of specific discussions about the challenges and strategies of learning English with native Thai teachers who have a non-graduate background in English education.

Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to examine new experiences from the perspective of two English teachers who are not English language education graduates while teaching at Islamic Witthayathan School. It is about **the teachers' challenges in teaching English at Islamic Witthayathan School Thailand and the strategies for dealing with English learning.**

## METHOD

### *Design*

The researchers conducted qualitative research using narrative inquiry which aims to understand and explain social phenomena in depth by interpreting them in the context, experiences, and perspectives of the parties involved. This research focuses on the experiences of two English teachers at Witthayathan Islamic School in Thailand who taught English for one year. The research focuses on **challenges in facing the difficulties of teaching English and the strategies in dealing with English learning at the school.** The main objective of the current study is to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study. This goal includes understanding individual experiences, social processes, cultural contexts, interactions, meaning construction, and the dynamics that occur in these phenomena (Creswell, 2014).

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were two English teachers at Witthayathan Islamic School at Matthayom or Senior High School level. The two informants were chosen because

they are the only English teachers in the school. In addition, although they do not have a background in teaching English, both teachers have been teaching for 10 months at the school so they have understood the challenges faced in teaching English there. T1 was the first English teacher interviewed who had a background in teaching fiqh. T2 is the second English teacher who has a background in teaching Thai. Both interviewees had no background in English education during their studies. The teaching of English since the first year has been decided since the new school year meeting at the school, where the distribution of teaching schedules is determined by the curriculum department and the principal. This is because both teachers are highly competent in teaching and adaptable to new things.

### ***Instruments***

In this qualitative research, interviews were used to obtain data that involved direct interaction between the researcher and the participants to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences, perceptions, and views related to the research topic (Elizabeth, 2016). In the interviews, two English teachers who teach at Witthayathan Islamic School were asked about the main challenges they face when teaching and the strategies used to overcome these challenges

### ***Data collection technique***

According to a scholar, the purpose of research is to collect data, so data collection methods are an essential step in research (Sugiyono, 2021). Data were collected from face-to-face interviews recorded using a smartphone. Respondents were asked two questions about their challenges when teaching and the strategies used to overcome them, which took 20 to 30 minutes. In answering respondents' questions, researchers deliberately used Malay to minimize misunderstandings and broaden their understanding of the phenomenon under study.

### ***Data analysis technique***

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with interviewees. The interviews were analyzed using thematic codes based on the research questions. Liamputtg (2009) argues that qualitative data generally applies a coding step in understanding the meaning or pattern of information patterns in qualitative data. Coding is the process of analyzing and examining existing raw data by labeling it in the form of words, phrases, or sentences. Data transcribed

from both sources is then compared to identify similarities and differences. Then, I posted to get the results. Further, the author also employs the reference manager "Mendeley Desktop" as part of offline automatic citing sources (Turmudi, 2020).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *Results*

#### **Challenges faced by teachers**

The challenges faced by teachers in learning English in Thailand are complex. Moreover, two teachers who teach at Witthayathan Islamic School are not in their fields or are not graduates of English education in college. Thus, the resource person felt confused when delivering learning materials to students. The many problems with the beginning of this schedule change made the two English teachers have to adapt immediately to the learning process.

Our interviews with two participants evidence this:

*T1: " At first, I was quite surprised and confused by the schedule distribution for the latest school year when I originally taught fiqh. I got an additional schedule to teach English at this Islamic school, Witthayathan School. However, what can be made if the curriculum and principal's decision is unanimous? Moreover, it must be obeyed. However, it is still new and difficult for me to teach English at this school. The problem faced when teaching, students do not have a good knowledge of English, do not know, do not understand, and it is difficult to memorize vocabulary. So that it makes students feel bored when learning English and the challenge for myself is to have to study extra in preparing for learning in the classroom"*

*T2: "This last decision was quite difficult for me. Because I had never taught English before, I had previously taught Thai. But inevitably I have to be a professional teacher and keep up with the developments and I have to try my best to teach English to students. This is a new challenge that I will face, and for sure, I must try my best to the students' intelligence. I face three major problems: the first student who cannot be invited to cooperate or is passive during learning, the second student who does not dare to speak because of difficulty pronouncing English, and the last student who cannot pronounce vocabulary properly and correctly."*

The interviews above shows the two teachers who transferred to teach English at Witthayathan Islamic School in Thailand faced significant challenges. Initially, they did not have adequate preparation or experience in teaching English, causing confusion and unpreparedness in the face of their new assignment. The main challenge lay in the students'

limited knowledge of English, which made the learning process less interactive and challenging for both teachers. They also faced difficulties in helping students overcome barriers in speaking and pronouncing English vocabulary correctly. Sudden schedule changes also added to the complexity, forcing both teachers to adapt to their new roles and abandon previous material they had taught. However, despite being faced with significant challenges, both teachers showed a solid commitment to being professional teachers and providing the best education to their students. Awareness of these challenges prompts the need for additional training and more significant support for teachers facing similar situations, as well as the expansion of curriculum development programs and inclusive teaching methods to improve English learning outcomes for affected students.

### **Strategies used by teachers**

Teachers face many challenges when learning English. However, teachers must ensure that teaching and learning activities continue despite the obstacles. Several strategies are carried out including teachers must be able to design learning media or use different learning methods as an innovation. For 12 months, the teachers used various strategies to overcome these problems.

Two participants expressed this during the interview:

*T1: "As a new language teacher, I must be sensitive to students' development, especially in overcoming students' teaching difficulties when memorizing vocabulary. The teacher asks students to memorize ten vocabulary words starting from reading verbs, then memorize them regularly every week, and then ask them to write down some of their memorization deposits. When learners can remember vocabulary, it is proven by students who are more enthusiastic about learning and better understand English learning. It is hoped that the school can provide additional training on curriculum implementation and learning to improve teachers' abilities further when teaching."*

*T2: "Many strategies are used to overcome various obstacles during the teaching and learning process. For example, when students cannot cooperate in class, I usually use games to reduce boredom during learning, watch videos related to new vocabulary, use flashcards, play drama, and make groups with classmates. Then when students do not dare to pronounce English vocabulary. I invite students to memorize related vocabulary, practice with their peers, and make more happy and compact groups to learn together. Furthermore, when students cannot pronounce the vocabulary well and correctly, I will do class reading exercises, English writing exercises, and conversation exercises related to daily life to improve students' vocabulary skills. Various methods have been proven to reduce boredom while learning in class."*

*Firdausyah and Islam (2024)*

The challenges of teaching English at Witthayathan Islamic School in Thailand bring out creativity and innovation in learning strategies. The two teachers interviewed showed strong efforts to overcome the problems they faced with various methods. One of the strategies used was to focus on students' vocabulary development. These teachers emphasized the importance of vocabulary recall by asking students to memorize new vocabulary regularly and write down their memorization. As a result, students show increased motivation and understanding towards learning English.

In addition, they also use a variety of different techniques to overcome specific barriers, such as students' lack of cooperation, timidity in speaking, and difficulty pronouncing vocabulary correctly. They adopt diverse approaches, including games, watching videos, flashcards, drama games, and group exercises to strengthen students' English skills. These varied approaches help reduce boredom in the classroom and allow students to learn in a way that suits their learning styles. In addition, both teachers highlighted the importance of additional training for teaching staff to improve their ability to deal with the complex challenges of teaching English. Thus, the findings suggest that with creativity, innovation, and a commitment to improving learning, teachers can overcome the challenges faced in teaching English and provide a more effective learning experience for their students.

### ***Discussion***

It is often found in educational institutions that teachers do not teach according to their field or educational background. This causes some teachers to simultaneously teach several subjects due to a lack of teaching staff or specific reasons. This is worth discussing because this policy boils down to the school having permission to decide on the policy. To some extent, this will impact teachers' performance by being difficult or feeling less professional because the teaching staff does not match their educational background.

However, this is not a barrier for teachers to become professionals. Each teacher has their way and creativity to achieve success in learning activities. In the context of Wittayathan School, findings from interviews with two teachers who teach English without an English educational background indicate that they face challenges like the situations described. Even though it does not match their educational background, the two teachers are still expected to be professional and obey school regulations. Sudden changes in learning schedules, as

mentioned in the interviews, indicate the need for change and adaptation on the part of these teachers.

However, despite these complex challenges, both teachers demonstrated a solid commitment to providing the best in English language learning. They use various strategies and learning methods to overcome obstacles, such as students' difficulties remembering vocabulary or lack of student cooperation.

Thus, even though the situation is not ideal, the commitment and creativity of these teachers allow them to continue to achieve success in teaching English despite the challenges they face, according to Arifin (2008). A professional teacher has a "sense of humanity and warmth" and always knows what students are doing in class and cares about what they do. For this reason, teachers must eliminate the opposing views of previous teachers, so that they are "more aware of what they are doing when teaching and more easily consider methods they have never used." Teachers must also have the courage to challenge learning approaches that are not innovative and reflective. The personal characteristics of a professional teacher include empathy for students, respect for individuals, a positive outlook and attitude, approachability, and a sense of humor.

Meanwhile, Uzer Usman, (2006) noted that the professional qualities required include: good organizational skills; professional relationships with staff, parents, and students, and respect for the skills of others. In traditional learning methods, teachers tend not to think. However, reflection is essential to change and improve learning. Professional teachers are teachers who must think critically about the actions they take in the learning process.

Another challenge is the challenge faced by students in understanding English, especially related to differences in structure and grammar between English and Thai, a theme revealed in interviews with the two teachers at Witthayathan Islamic School. These teachers said that their students had difficulty understanding English learning material, especially in terms of memorizing vocabulary and speaking and pronouncing words correctly. This is due to the findings that students feel difficult and do not know when learning English. Despite not having a background in English education, both teachers demonstrated a commitment to learning and developing their abilities in facilitating English language learning for their students. This is by Bolton, (2018) who states that in learning vocabulary, students may

experience difficulties, especially EFL students. Because there are differences between the mother tongue and the target language. According to Altyari, (2017) argues that English language learners often have difficulty finding the meaning of new words and remembering them. Vocabulary learning can improve students' understanding of the target language. Most Thai students attribute pronunciation difficulties to differences in Thai and English pronunciation and differences between what they write and what they hear. According to Rohmatillah, (2015), students' difficulties in pronouncing words are mainly caused by differences in how they pronounce English and Indonesian, for example, the pronunciation of words such as muscle, listen, etc. Pronunciation errors are often caused by a lack of sound similarity between English and the student's native language. Often errors occur because students do not notice the difference between sound and spelling, which causes difficulty learning words.

Additionally, different spelling patterns can also cause pronunciation confusion. Based on previous research conducted by Rahman, (2016) researchers found that the difficulties faced by students in mastering vocabulary were that the majority of students experienced difficulties in grammar.

Furthermore, Afzal (2019) stated that learning vocabulary is difficult, especially for non-native English speakers who have problems with the meaning of new words, spelling, pronunciation, correct use of words, and deducing meaning from context. They experience several difficulties in learning English vocabulary, such as pronouncing words, not knowing the meaning of new words, etc.

Therefore, the process of acquiring a second language requires excellent motivation.

However, when someone uses a second language to communicate, they only convey the meaning of what they want to convey without paying attention to the structure of the sentence. In addition, unconscious inferences from the first language will occur when using a second language. As Derakhshan and Karim (2015) state, a second language learner will experience inferences from the first language, both orally and in writing. Likewise, according to Beardsmore (1982), interference in the habit of using the first language (L1) is caused by students experiencing problems in several aspects of using the second language (L2), such as phonology, vocabulary, and grammar. This means that language intervention involves

language habits and native language skills. Therefore, he must have grammatical skills to develop his communicative competence. Grammar makes a sentence understandable because inappropriate or wrong word order in a sentence will make the sentence difficult to understand. People proficient in grammar can convey messages quickly, and their listeners will understand them easily.

Apart from that, the problem or challenge English teachers face in Thailand is the lack of student motivation to learn English. To overcome these various problems. Two teachers have various strategies to improve students' understanding by teaching English with various learning methods. This should be a particular concern for a teacher to think about how to transfer knowledge well to students because students will only remember and apply learning outcomes if they are actively involved in the learning process. One of the things that is most often of concern in the language learning process is method.

The success or failure of a language learning program is often judged in terms of the methods used. Because it is the method that determines the content and method of teaching language skills. In the learning system, teaching methods are an integral part that cannot be separated, and the teaching components are intertwined as a system that is interconnected and influences each other. In this context, teachers must design learning strategies that take into account the structural and grammatical differences between English and Thai. They need to develop approaches that can help their students to understand and overcome these difficulties. For example, by emphasizing understanding basic concepts in English, using concrete examples or cases relevant to the student's cultural and environmental context, and utilizing technology and interactive learning media.

In addition, these findings also underline the vital role of teachers in preparing themselves well and improving their skills in teaching English. The method is chosen as a bridge or medium for transforming lessons towards achieving goals (Sunhaji, 1970). A learning method is a way to form or strengthen participants' (information recipients') understanding of a presentation of information/teaching materials. Learning methods have a significant influence because learning objectives will be achieved well if the teacher adjusts the method used when delivering learning material.

*Firdausyiah and Islam (2024)*

Two teachers at Witthayathan Islamic School adopted various strategies to overcome challenges in teaching English. One way is to encourage students to memorize new vocabulary regularly every week by reading verbs and writing down what they memorize. In addition, they use games and play activities to reduce student boredom and increase their involvement in learning. Teachers also use interactive learning media, such as watching videos and making flashcards, to strengthen students' understanding of new vocabulary. Diverse approaches to learning, such as playing drama and creating groups with classmates, are also used to increase student motivation and engagement.

In addition, English reading, writing, and conversation practice classes are held to help students improve their ability to use vocabulary properly and correctly. By implementing these strategies, both teachers strive to create a supportive and effective learning environment for their students. Teachers must have the ability to use learning methods and media in teaching. The methods used are according to the teaching objectives, the methods used are appropriate to the student's circumstances, the methods used are appropriate to the facilities, and educators must have the ability to communicate with students (Darmadi, 2010). In this case, teachers need variations in teaching. 9 For this reason, variations in the use of learning methods are necessary so that basic English language skills (listening, writing, reading, speaking) can be achieved well (Whitton, 2015). Based on the statement above shows that the existence of varied methods is significant in learning achievement, especially in English subjects. The lesson material sometimes makes students feel bored, lazy to learn, and forgetting quickly. So a teacher must be clever in using methods that suit the subject matter.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

### *Conclusion*

The findings of this research are significant because the researcher looked at two perspectives from teachers who teach English who do not have an English educational background and found several findings, such as teaching challenges and strategies for facing challenges when teaching English.

### *Limitation*

The main challenges teachers at Witthayathan Islamic School face in teaching English include students' difficulties in remembering vocabulary, lack of student cooperation,

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difficulties in speaking and pronouncing vocabulary, and differences in structure and grammar between English and Thai. However, both teachers managed to overcome these challenges by implementing appropriate strategies. These strategies include memorizing vocabulary regularly, using games and play activities to reduce student boredom, utilizing interactive learning media, adopting diverse approaches to learning, and holding English reading, writing, and conversation practice classes. By implementing these strategies, teachers strive to create a supportive and effective learning environment and help improve students' English language understanding and skills at the school.

***Implication***

Therefore, this research is essential to fill the gap and for future research, such as Providing training to teachers to become professional and providing insight to teachers to use varied teaching methods to overcome boredom or students who cannot work together in class.

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