Thai EFL Teachers' Experiences and Viewpoints of Using Stories and Themes for Teaching English to Young Learners

Kanya Panapob
Ubon Rajabhat University

Jirapa Abhakorn
National Institute of Development Administration

Abstract

This qualitative research study aims to investigate the Thai English teachers' experiences and views toward story and theme-based teaching to young learners in Thailand, and also to compare the findings between two groups of teachers with different educational backgrounds. A purposive sampling of four Thai English teachers from four different schools was employed for the study. The data were collected from 10 classroom observations over a period of two months and was followed by a semi-structured interview of each participant. The research instruments include the observation checklist, field notes, and semi-structured interviews which were developed based on the theoretical framework of Cameron (2001). The data were analyzed in the form of the frequency of the occurrences. The findings revealed that all participants are inexperienced in incorporating stories into teaching and have very little knowledge and skills in teaching English through themes. Paradoxically, they are aware of the benefits of both teaching methods. These findings show that teacher training at the universities may be insufficient to prepare good teachers of the English language to teach young learners and most of them still require proper and continual pedagogical training on story and theme-based teaching as well as other teaching methods for young learners at a specific age group.

Introduction

The English language has become increasingly permeated into daily life because it is widely used as a global language tool to connect people from different countries around the world both in academic and non-academic contexts. In a non-academic context, the English language can be found on labels of food and household products, in movies and songs, in published news articles and other documents, and on social media. Therefore, schools must equip their students with English language proficiency and competence from

an early age to help them survive competitively in a globalized world where English is used as a global language.

   In the past, most young learners (YLs) of the English language, especially learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), had a limited opportunity to use English in a classroom context. They also had very little exposure to the natural usage of the English language in their daily lives. However, now YLs are increasingly exposed to English used outside their classroom environment due to the rapid growth of digital technology. Thus, children growing up in the digital age are more likely than before to have the potential to engage and achieve English language competence from a very young age. Dryden and Mukherji (2014) also suggested that YLs at their prime stage of learning (age 2 to 12 years old), can acquire a second or a foreign language faster than adults because of their readiness in terms of cognitive functions. Therefore, to develop competency in English or other second languages, it is better to start the developmental process at a young age (Bland, 2015).

   Nonetheless, the acquisition of English at a young age cannot always guarantee the perfect attainment of second language competence because YLs still need guidance from knowledgeable teachers and appropriate language teaching methods to facilitate and shape the process of language development in the right way (Bialystok, 1997; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006). Several researchers such as Cameron (2001), Kiziltan and Ersanli (2007), Sesiorina (2014), and Shin (2006) have suggested various teaching methods that are appropriate for teaching EFL for YLs. Some of these methods include teaching English through stories and themes, which can focus on different language knowledge and skills development. According to Machdarifah and Yunita (2019), integrating stories and language can develop YLs' critical thinking, interpreting, and communication abilities. They further stated that the two significant drawbacks to success in EFL classes for both teachers and YLs are motivation and communication. Most students may have knowledge of the grammatical and linguistic structure of English, but most of them may fail to practice these skills properly. The stories provide a key solution to these problems because stories not only motivate YLs but also exemplify the use of grammatical structures in the target language.

   Moreover, as most English textbooks contain different themes, teachers must still supplement activities under the same themes provided in textbooks in order to extend knowledge for YLs. According to Cameron (2001) and Shin (2006), theme-based teaching method allows teachers to create interconnected activities and tasks under one theme. Furthermore, content from other subjects can be incorporated into each theme for teaching and learning the English language. These are the reasons which support the concept that story and theme-based teaching methods are helpful for teaching EFL to YLs.

EFL Teaching for YLs in Thailand

In Thailand, the English language has been a compulsory foreign language subject in the Thai Basic Education Core Curriculum for primary education levels since 1999. In the past, many researchers claimed that English language teachers use the traditional teaching method which is teacher-centered. Nowadays, the approach of learner-centered and technology-based language learning is favored more than the traditional teacher-centered method, and the teaching and learning activities were suggested to shift toward autonomous and independent learning (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011).

In evaluating the success or failure of the reform movement in teaching EFL to YLs, English language teachers are one of the key factors to study since they are responsible for implementing the policy into practice. According to previous research, most Thai English language teachers have commonly reported that they adopted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as their main teaching approach (Methitham, 2009; Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011; Saengboon, 2002), which corresponds to the principle of EFL teaching as stated in the English core curriculum. For Thai teachers who teach EFL to YLs in particular, Prasongporn (2016) pointed out that more than 50% of primary school teachers in Thailand did not graduate with English language-related degrees. Moreover, they had to be responsible to teach other subjects besides teaching the English language. Even though some teachers received degrees in English major, most of them still lack the knowledge and skills required for English language teaching, especially those for teaching YLs of particular age groups. Moreover, Noom-Ura (2013) also reported that some English language teachers lack skills and knowledge of the proper English teaching methods. Teaching English through stories and themes are believed to be useful teaching methods for YLs. Teaching through stories enables YLs to understand and appreciate other cultures, societies, and beliefs which may differ from their own while, at the same time, encouraging personal growth and academic development (Carter et al., 1988). Teaching English through themes is another appropriate teaching method because it allows for many lessons and activities to be created under a single theme while simultaneously permitting the incorporation of other subjects under its umbrella. Therefore, it is important for the researchers to investigate whether the teachers have the knowledge and skills required for the two teaching methods, and also to compare the similarities and differences relating to the teaching experiences and viewpoints between teachers from two different educational backgrounds.

Research Questions

1. What are Thai EFL teachers' experiences and viewpoints on using stories and themes for teaching EFL to YLs at the primary schools (grade 1 to grade 6) in Ubon Ratchatani Province?

2. Are there any similarities or differences, relating to their experiences and viewpoints toward teaching EFL through stories and themes, comparing teachers who hold a B.Ed. and a B.A. in English major at Ubon Rajabhat University in Ubon Ratchatani Province?

Literature Review

Young Learners' Second Language Acquisitions

The Critical Period Hypothesis is held accountable for the L2 acquisition of YLs, as mentioned by several researchers (Birchwood et al., 1998; Singleton, 2005; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995). Age is considered one of the most significant factors that most researchers used to explain the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. Brown (1994, p. 52) claimed that, for L2 acquisition, there is "a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which language is increasingly difficult to acquire". McLaughlin (1987) also added that there is a fixed biologically determined period for the L2 acquisition of children between the ages of 2 to12 years old. Moreover, with an early age start, constant exposure to the target language and proper teaching techniques is believed to positively affect the rate of language learning (Gürsoy, 2011).

There have been various theories that describe the nature of L2 acquisition, which enable language teachers to understand the language learning process of YLs and to better design proper syllabuses, teaching processes, and classroom activities for YLs. For instance, Ellis (1994, as cited in Ipek, 2009) stated that there are three stages of the L2 developmental process which are the silent period, formulaic speech, and structural and semantic simplification. According to Ellis (1994, as cited in Ipek, 2009) learners develop second language competence through listening first before speaking. This speaking developmental stage is known as *formulaic speech*. Lyons (1968, cited in Ellis, 1994) defines formulaic speech as an expression, which can be in the form of routines or patterns, that is learned and employed in a particular situation. The language developmental process continues to the third stage, in which Ipek (2009) suggested that children usually omit or simplify the grammatical functions (e.g., articles, auxiliary verbs) and the content words (e.g., nouns, verbs). English language teachers of YLs need to understand the process of L2 acquisition to design English language teaching and learning methods that are appropriate for children.

Teaching English through Stories to Young Learners

Story- and theme-based English language teaching is a famous method for teaching English to YLs because there are several benefits that stories can bring to English language teaching and learning (Bland, 2015; Cameron, 2001; Shin, 2006). According to Cameron (2001), learning the English language through stories is similar to bringing the outside world into the classroom because stories associate the learners with genuine uses of the

English language. Moreover, Mart (2012) claimed that integrating stories into English language learning at an early age can raise learner's awareness of the rich and authentic use of English.

Stories can be integrated into YLs' English language classrooms for different purposes. For instance, storytelling can be used to develop English listening and speaking skills while engaging learners in different situations (Cameron, 2001). Also, the structure of stories can help YLs understand the logical and thematic structure of the content. Several researchers (e.g., Bland, 2015; Cameron, 2001; Mart, 2012) believed that YLs can learn a prototypical storytelling feature; such as an opening, introduction of characters, description of the setting, introduction of an issue, a sequence of event, the resolution of the issue, a closing and a moral while learning English through stories. In addition, there are linguistic features that are commonly found in children's stories, such as parallelism (repetition of phrases), vocabulary (unfamiliar words), alliteration (words with the same initial consonants), contrast (strong differences between characters), metaphor (setting), intertextuality (references within the text), and narrative/dialogue, that can be used to promote English language learning. Cameron (2001) and Bland (2015) suggested that to implement stories in English language teaching, teachers should carefully select appropriate stories for the YLs. Moreover, they suggested that language teachers evaluate stories according to these criteria when incorporating stories into YLs' lessons: *quality books or 'real books'; content that encourages learners; values and attitudes embodied; discourse is well organized; balance of dialogue and narrative; and how and what new language is used.*

According to some of the previous studies, Chithra (2018) used short stories to enable YLs between the age of 4 to 10 years to negotiate meanings and connect the texts with the world at a private school in Gurgaon and a government-run school in north Delhi. The results revealed that the YLs were able to connect their thoughts, feelings, and memories, and understand themselves better when incorporating stories into their lessons. Porras González (2010) studied utilizing stories for teaching English as a foreign language to YLs in first to third grades at a Colombian public elementary school in Bucaramanga, Colombia. The results of the study revealed that stories increased the YLs' motivation when they were told or read, participation in the different activities, comprehension of the stories, and acquisition of the new vocabulary. However, in Huang's (2021) study on teaching EFL through stories to Chinese primary students in classrooms in China, the results showed that the teachers failed to explain the stories' content and they instead applied traditional teaching approaches due to their lack of knowledge of how to select appropriate stories and how to apply stories for English language teaching. There are some, however limited, research studies on using stories for teaching English to YLs in Thai context. Khamsuk and Whanchit (2021) conducted research on improving YLs' English vocabulary through storytelling during the Covid-19 pandemic in the South of Thailand. The data collection and analyses were conducted on the five stories' pre- and post-test scores, observation of YLs' learning performance, and parents' reflection. The stories were

written in Thai with the insertion of 15 English words in each story. The results showed the development of the YLs' English vocabulary and also showed the parents' satisfaction with their children's learning behavior.

Teaching English through Themes to Young Learners

According to Cameron (2001), the main concept of teaching English through theme is that teaching and learning activities are designed based on the thematic content, and they are connected under the umbrella of one theme. A theme can be selected and used for developing more than one lesson per week, or several weeks in a semester. Moreover, Cameron (2001) suggested different ways that teachers can reassure that YLs gain benefits from theme-based language learning. The first is to allow YLs to choose a theme or topic according to their interest. Next is to design content-based language teaching which allows YLs to learn the English language at the same time as they are learning other subjects such as mathematics, science, language, history, geography, music, and arts. The last technique is to provide YLs with opportunities to gain exposure to the natural use of the meaningful thematic content of the English language.

According to Cameron (2001), the most difficult part of implementing themes into English teaching is the 'planning stage'. She stated that teachers need to have the knowledge of using this teaching method and the awareness of their YLs' English language needs to plan and design the content/activities that work together to promote language learning. Shin (2006) also suggested that teachers should select themes from various sources (e.g., the learner's current interest, different class subjects being contemplated, stories, local events, or international festivals). However, the selected themes, as well as designed English language content and activities, must be suitable to the YLs' age, cultural background, and language learning needs (Cameron, 2001).

Sokhamkaew (2016) conducted research using content-based instruction, which was constructed from the themes, to investigate 30 Thai primary school YLs' English reading comprehension at Sriracha, Chonburi, Thailand. However, the focus of this research was on the content of the themes, not the theme itself. The researcher conducted the activities based on the themes of YLs' interests. Pre- and post-tests, a self-assessment questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview were used for the data collection and, SPSS and Microsoft Excel were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that content-based instruction improved Thai EFL primary YLs' reading comprehension, enhanced their participation in the classrooms, and encouraged their English learning. Kiziltan and Ersanli (2007) also studied the effectiveness of the three content-based instructions (sheltered, adjunct, and theme-based models) to YLs in Turkish public schools. The experiments were divided into two control groups and one pilot group. The first control group was taught in a second language by a content specialist and an ESL specialist using the sheltered model. The second control group was taught by ESL teachers using an adjunct model. The pilot group was taught by ESL teachers using the theme-based model. The study found that the YLs who learned English through themes were significantly more improved in terms of

language skills than those who learned through the sheltered and adjunct models. The YLs were allowed to choose themes that corresponded with their interests; therefore, the English lessons were fun and motivating. They developed their collaborative skills from pair and group work, and they were able to use language in a more meaningful way through relevant theme-based content materials selection.

Alptekin et. al. (2007) also studied the effectiveness of teaching English through themes to Turkish YLs between the ages of 10 and 11 years old. The two groups of students were randomly assigned to one of the two syllabus types and received instruction for two years. The syllabuses were designed based on two different language instructional frameworks of Widdowson (1990) and Cummins (1981). The control group was exposed to the grammatical syllabus of which the content was chosen according to the textbook, and the teaching methodology was guided by the Turkish Ministry of National Education. In contrast, the experimental group learned the English language through a theme-based syllabus, of which the content was designed in parallel to the topical content of subject areas in the curriculum. The results revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group both in listening and reading/writing skills.

There have been some, however limited, studies on implementing the story and theme-based teaching methods to YLs in Thai context. However, these teaching methods seem to be popular in many other countries. According to Cameron (2001) and Shin (2006), these two teaching methods require knowledgeable and skillful teachers to conduct the lessons effectively. Ulla and Winitkun (2018) postulated that qualified, well educated, and well trained teachers lead to effective teaching. In Thailand, there are two types of English teachers; ones who hold a degree in B.Ed. and the others who hold a degree B.A. majoring in English. The former ones received some training of English language teaching but the latter did not receive any teaching training. White (1998) believed that quality teaching can be attained and sustained by attending to the process in training and developing teachers in professional skills and judgement, rather than by acquiring craft skills alone. In addition, Cameron (2001) also believed that teaching English is not a straightforward process that can be undertaken by anyone with a basic training in ELT. Cameron's arguments emphasize the necessity of specific training for teachers who teach English to YLs. Therefore, this study hopes to shed some light on as to whether two groups of teachers who hold degrees in English major but are from different fields of education are implementing stories and themes into teaching English to YLs differently. Also, to investigate whether the teachers' educational backgrounds affect the way they are teaching English to YLs.

Methodology

The methodology was designed to focus on the participants' teaching experiences and viewpoints; therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted because it is useful for a study of the natural setting to retrieve detailed and in-depth information.

Participants

The participants are four Thai female English teachers who teach English as a foreign language at primary schools located in Ubon Ratchatani Province. A purposive sampling of participants was employed to select the participants for the study. Two teachers received a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in English major, and the other two teachers received a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in English Major. All of the participants graduated from Ubon Ratchatani Ratjabhat University, and have been teaching English for 3 years.

The first two English teachers holding a B.Ed. degree are referred to as T1 and T2. T1 teaches EFL at the early-primary level (1st grade – 3rd grade), while T2 teaches EFL at the late-primary level (4th grade – 6th grade). The other two teachers holding a B.A. degree in English major are referred to as T3 and T4. T3 teaches EFL at the early-primary level, whereas T4 teaches EFL at the late-primary level. All but T3 teach English subjects only. The teachers who hold a B.Ed. received some training in teaching EFL, whereas the teachers who hold a B.A. did not receive any EFL pedagogical training.

Research Instruments

The research instruments include the observation checklist, field notes, and semi-structured interviews which were developed based on the theoretical framework of Cameron (2001) to find answers to each research question.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The data collection procedures are divided into three phases: sample familiarization and research boundary designation, observation, and interview. First, the researcher met with each participant and the school director to inform them about the study, its goals, and its procedures. After that, the researcher asked the participants to sign the consent form before interviewing each of them individually. Then, the second phase, which was classroom observation, began from the first week of February to March of the year 2021 and lasted approximately 8 weeks. There were 10 lessons in total, lasting from 50 minutes to an hour per lesson.

The observation field note data were used for triggering the participants to reflect on the observed data. Moreover, the data from the field notes were used to triangulate with the interview data and to compare the observed implementation and the viewpoints of the participants toward story and theme-based teaching methods.

The last phase, which consisted of semi-structured interviews, was conducted a week after the researcher had completed viewing and finalizing the observation field notes. The researcher arranged face-to-face interviews one at a time with the participants. The interview questions were pre-designed and grouped into three sections: (1) the educational background, (2) teaching method implementation, and (3) the viewpoints toward each

teaching method. However, the participants were encouraged to share their experiences and viewpoints freely during the conversation. The interview was conducted in the Thai language to help the participants feel confident in communicating and expressing their ideas. An audio recorder was used to record the interview data for further analysis.

To analyze the interview data, the researcher listened to the audio recordings several times before transcribing the audio data of each participant. Next, the transcribed data was sent to each participant for the accuracy verification of the data and for the purpose of validity. After that, the data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method (Evans, 2018), and the researcher translated the results into the English language. Then, data was sent to the lecturer who has experience in teaching English translation for many years to verify the accuracy and reliably of the translation before the researcher report the results.

Results

Teaching English through Story for YLs: Thai Teachers' Views and Practices

The observation field notes and the interview results reveal the similarities and differences in the participants' teaching experiences and viewpoints toward teaching English through stories. When the researcher inquired about the participants' teaching experience in using stories and the planning and selecting methods, only T1 claimed that she had experience in teaching English through stories; although she performed that only once. T1 also stated that she planned and selected the stories according to the YLs' interests and age appropriateness. T1 further noted that she used story-based teaching to teach English listening and writing skills to YLs in the third grade. Nevertheless, she did not use this teaching method due to the time consumption in planning and conducting a lesson. In contrast, T2, T3, and T4 reported that they were inexperienced in using this teaching method. However, they started to have an idea after the researcher introduced the concept of this teaching method to them, and they were able to provide opinions on teaching English through stories to YLs. Unfortunately, the observation field notes showed that all participants, including T1, did not teach English through stories during the 10 classroom observations. Therefore, the report of the findings is mainly based on the interview data.

Comparison of T1 and T3: Thai teachers with different educational backgrounds teaching EFL at the primary level

The interview data revealed one thematic similarity between T1 and T3 in terms of the story-based teaching implementation. T1 reported that she once used the story to develop English listening and writing skills; also T3 thought she would focus on the English listening skill if she had a chance to use it. T1 and T3 had slightly similar viewpoints about how to plan and select stories for English language teaching. T1 planned and selected the stories according to the YLs' interests and age appropriateness, while T3 would plan and select stories according to the lesson's objective or the YLs' age

appropriateness. However, T3 did not mention the importance of the learner's interest when planning and selecting stories for English language teaching.

Regarding their opinions on the effectiveness of story-based teaching to YLs, T1 and T3 had different opinions. T1 believed that this teaching method could enhance the YLs' imagination and memorization, while T3 believed that it would motivate YLs to learn English, enhance listening skills, and allow teachers to create various activities. Interestingly, T1 also pointed out a possible challenge of using stories to teach EFL to YLs. She stated that YLs with very low English language proficiency may not enjoy learning English through stories due to a lack of understanding of the story. Therefore, the effectiveness of the method depends on how the teacher plans and selects the story. In contrast, T3 believed that all YLs would enjoy learning through stories because most YLs grew up with stories. She did not think there would be any limitation to this method of English language teaching.

Comparison of T2 and T4: Thai teachers with different educational backgrounds teaching EFL at the late-primary level

Based on T2's and T4's opinions of teaching English through stories, T2 would plan and select a story according to the YLs' interests and familiarity. She could also develop YLs' reading and writing skills through this teaching method. In contrast, T4 did not provide an answer to how she would plan and select the story or which language skill could be developed through stories because she had not previously heard of such a teaching method.

Regarding effectiveness, both participants believed that this teaching method could benefit both teachers and YLs. T2 noted that teachers can create many activities under one story and YLs can enjoy the story while learning. In contrast, T4 believed that YLs probably would concentrate well when learning English through stories because most children enjoy listening to the stories. Both participants did not believe that the story-based teaching method has any disadvantages.

Teaching English through Theme for YLs: Thai Teachers' Views and Practices

During the 10 observed lessons, the researcher found that the participants taught English through themes differently, although all of them followed themes that were provided in the textbook. T1, T2, and T4 were found to develop extra activities (e.g., games, pair-work, group-work), in addition to the textbook activities, using the themes. Before starting the activity, they modeled the activity first and also translated the vocabulary from English to Thai to ensure the students' understanding. Moreover, T2 and T4 also translated the instructions from English to Thai language to ensure that the YLs knew how to complete the tasks. The observation field notes also revealed that T1 encouraged the YLs to participate in the activity, as well as praised and provided feedback

to YLs in English at the end of the activity. T2 was also found to provide feedback and suggestions, but in both Thai and English. In contrast, T4 provided both feedback and suggestions in Thai only. Contrasting to the others, T3 did not develop any extra activities during the 10 observed lessons. She strictly used the textbook to teach English and provided suggestions and feedback for the YLs in the Thai language only. The textbook activities were mostly structural-based individual activities (e.g., grammar exercises and worksheets).

Similar to the observation findings, all participants reported in the interviews that they preferred to follow the themes provided in the textbook. Themes from the textbook were believed to be well-designed and appropriate for the YLs. However, T1 and T2 noted that they also selected the themes according to the YLs' language proficiency and interests. Through themes, both participants reported that they developed various activities for teaching different language skills. T1 reported that she used themes to conduct activities for teaching English conversation. T2 said "I use themes for designing activities to teach all four skills". T3 said that she used themes to develop activities for teaching vocabulary and grammar, and T4 said "I use theme-based activities for teaching reading and writing skills". As reported in the previous paragraph, it was observed that T1, T2, and T4 developed various extra activities to improve language skills. However, T3 did not develop any physical activities for teaching vocabulary or grammar, she only followed the textbook activities which focused on vocabulary and grammar teaching.

As for the effectiveness of teaching English through themes, all participants believed that this teaching method contains benefits for both teachers and YLs. T1 and T4 stated that the content from other learning subjects can be used to develop a theme. T2 believed that YLs can be involved in the theme selection, and T3 stated that many activities can be created under one theme, but cannot be used to teach grammar. Nonetheless, during the classroom observation, T3 did not use the theme to create any physical activity as stated in the interview, but she used the exercises in the form of a worksheet to accompany each lesson.

Comparison of T1 and T3: Thai teachers with different educational backgrounds teaching EFL at the primary level

There are two main thematic similarities between T1 and T3 involving the planning and the theme selection methods. Both participants are experienced in teaching English through themes and planned and selected the themes according to the textbooks. Besides selected the themes from the textbooks, T1 also selected the themes and activities according to the YLs' interests and language proficiency. However, T1 and T3 have their differences when incorporating themes into teaching English to YLs. T1 reported that she used themes to develop YLs' conversational skills; although, it was observed that she focused on short and simplified conversations. Conversely, T3 reported that she used themes to teach English

vocabulary and grammar, which mirrored the way she conducted the lesson following the textbook without adding any extra activities.

The interview data also revealed the participants positive views toward the effectiveness of teaching English through themes. T1 believed that this teaching method allows teachers to incorporate themes with or from other subjects. T3 believed that this teaching method could help teachers create various activities. However, T3 believed that theme-based teaching is not helpful for grammar teaching, although she was observed following the theme in the textbook when teaching vocabulary and grammar.

Comparison of T2 and T4: Thai teachers with different educational backgrounds teaching EFL at the late-primary level

The interview data revealed that T2 and T4 shared similarities in their teaching experience and planning method, but reported theme selection methods somewhat differently. Both participants are experienced and have used a theme-based teaching method in their classrooms. They planned and selected the theme according to the topics in the textbook. However, T2 noted that she sometimes planned and selected the themes according to the YLs' interests. Regarding the language skills being developed through themes, T2 and T4 used the theme to develop language skills differently. T2 used themes to develop all four skills, while T4 used themes to develop reading and writing skills which matched the data found in the observation field notes.

Regarding the effectiveness of teaching English through themes, the participants have different views. T2 postulated that it would help YLs to focus more on learning if the teacher allows YLs to select the theme which aligns with their interests. Nonetheless, T2 believed that YLs would be unable to select the theme of their interests if the teacher had already selected it. Dissimilarly, T4 believed that theme-based teaching has no limitation because one main theme can help link one lesson to other lessons.

Discussion

Teaching English through story and theme is commonly suggested by many scholars (e.g., Cameron, 2001; Mart 2012; Shin 2006; Wright 1995) and practiced in primary education in many countries. However, teaching English through story is not commonly practiced, and teaching English through theme is not quite properly conducted in Thailand. This assertion is supported by the reflection of the observation data which demonstrated that all participants did not strategically implement stories and themes into their English lessons. Moreover, based on the interview data, the participants knew very little about how to plan and select the appropriate stories and themes for teaching English, which language skills can be developed through stories and themes, and the effectiveness of these teaching methods to YLs. One of the participants (T4) even said that she had not previously heard

of a story-based English language teaching method. This implies that Thai teachers lack the necessary knowledge and skills required to prepare story and theme-based ELT lessons.

For story-based ELT, a story is a basic form of literature or narration that is introduced to most YLs at an early age and is also comprised of general world knowledge (Cameron, 2001). Moreover, it is theoretically believed that children, in general, have an innate ability to acquire language while at the same time they can enjoy listening to story reading by adults. Unfortunately, although storytelling is considered one of the common family activities for YLs in Western countries, it is not quite common in the social context of the Thai family at present, especially in rural areas. Nevertheless, in the researcher's view, Thai teachers must know how to incorporate stories into their English teaching to YLs because teaching English through stories can be one way to enhance students' general world knowledge and extend their enjoyment of learning English. The present research revealed the Thai teachers' views of the benefits of story-based teaching are somewhat consistent with the findings of many other researchers who found that stories had a positive effect on language learning (e.g., Al-Dersi, 2013; Chou, 2014; Thiyagarajan, 2014). Although T1 postulated that YLs with low English proficiency may not enjoy learning English through stories if the story is too difficult. However, the researcher believes that YLs with different levels of language proficiency can still benefit from learning English through stories if their teachers know how to select the stories and activities that match their learning abilities and interests.

In the researcher's view, Thai English teachers should receive continual training in story-based teaching along with other methods for teaching English to YLs because they were mostly trained only in the English language and English language teaching in general while at university level. The theories and methods for teaching English to learners in specific age groups such as YLs may be overlooked. Savic and Shin (2016) and Saydakhmetova (2020) suggested that teachers of YLs should have extra skills and knowledge to choose and simplify the story or create their own stories to meet the YLs interests and language proficiency before planning the English language learning activities. Cameron (2001) and Bland (2015) also suggested that teachers who have narrative knowledge and skills can identify discourse organization of stories and conduct activities to develop discourse competence for YLs. These suggestions can serve as the core idea for developing EFL teacher training in Thailand, particularly in terms of developing training programs for EFL teachers of YLs.

For theme-based teaching, according to Larsen-Freeman (2012), the important stage of this teaching method is the theme selection and planning stage. Based on the interview findings, all participants followed the themes in the textbooks. This method of planning and selecting themes is also congruent with the suggestion of Cameron (2001) and Shin (2006), who suggested that the teachers may select the themes from the textbook to create extra activities because most themes construct the chapter with related grammatical and meaningful language content. In the researcher's opinion, there may be two factors that

influence such a decision by English language teachers. It is a matter of fact that using themes in the textbook is convenient and helps assure the alignment of the teaching content stated in the school's curriculum. However, Cameron (2001) and Larsen-Freeman (2012) also point out that YLs' interests should be considered as well. They note that language teachers should be flexible and that YLs should be allowed to take part in the process of selecting and planning themes for the lessons. From the interview data, T1 and T2 reported that they sometimes asked the YLs what they would like to learn before they started planning the activities. Allowing YLs to become involved in the learning process is one of the theme selections that was suggested by Cameron (2001), and it also correlated to the expected learning outcomes of the national EFL curriculum which focuses on being learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. Importantly, this method of theme selection has been found to be successful in Kiziltan and Ersanli's (2007) study. The YLs were allowed to select the themes of their interests. They found that the YLs were significantly improved in terms of language skills and that the lessons were fun and motivating.

Based on the observation field notes and the interview findings, it is possible to conclude that although all participants' skills and knowledge are quite limited, T1 and T2, who possessed an educational background in English language teaching, could provide more precise ideas on how to implement stories and themes into the lessons than T3 and T4, who graduated with the degree in the English language. Similarly, T1 and T2 provided more information than T3 and T4 on how to implement theme-based teaching. The former group seems to be better aware of the benefits that YLs may receive from this teaching method than the latter or perhaps the latter group just strictly taught according to the school curriculum. They did not only teach according to the themes in the textbook but also selected themes that interested students and created extra learning activities. This may be the result of some teaching training T1 and T2 received from the teacher education program, which was not provided for the teachers who graduated from the English language department. According Noom-Ura (2013) and Prasongporn (2016), unqualified and poorly-trained teachers are one of the factors that were reported to cause the failure of English teaching in Thailand. Thus, the findings contribute to the concept of the importance of lifelong learning of language teachers in that teachers should continually learn about various methods available for teaching English to specific groups of learners or for the learner groups that they are teaching because the training they received from their respective universities may have been too limited or too general.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to study Thai EFL teachers of YLs from two different educational backgrounds in regards to their experiences with and thoughts about the two well-known methods for teaching English to YLs, that is, story and theme-based teaching. Although both groups have different educational backgrounds, they nevertheless hold a degree in an English major, they have the same amount of teaching experience, and they are teaching English to YLs. Therefore, they are expected to have some sort of knowledge

and skills before teaching English to YLs. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that both groups of Thai English language teachers still lack the knowledge and skills of these two EFL teaching methods for YLs. Thus, it portrays a clear indication that there is an urgent need for the teachers' educators to equip Thai English language teachers (with or without an educational background) with the knowledge and skills needed for teaching English, particularly to YLs. In addition, the researcher believes that the findings from this research provide useful information for stakeholders in the EFL educational field, especially in English teaching for YLs, and highlights an issue with the current teaching in the context of Thai schools.

It is obvious from the findings that all participants recognized the significant benefits or usefulness of using stories and themes in teaching English to YLs. However, they were quite inexperienced and had very little knowledge and skills in teaching English through stories and themes. These findings, by and large, show that English language learning or teacher training at the universities may be inadequate to prepare good teachers of English language for YLs and that most Thai English language teachers need proper and continual pedagogical training on story and theme-based teaching as well as other methods for teaching English to YLs at a specific age group. As it stands, it is undeniable that stories are considered an essential part of children's literacy development, and teaching English through stories would allow them to be exposed to the natural use of English. Moreover, most YLs enjoy stories and because of the nature of story-based teaching, students are more likely to engage with the lessons (Mart, 2012). As to theme-based teaching, many lessons and activities can be created under one theme to help supplement the lessons in the textbook. Other subjects, such as math and art, can be readily incorporated into a theme which helps to broaden and enrich YLs' understanding of the subject matter.

Since this study was only undertaken in four primary schools in Thailand, the results cannot necessarily be applied to other schools. However, there are several issues that require further investigation, for instance, how English teachers from other school areas teach English to YLs. Additionally, the English teacher trainer curriculum also needs to be investigated because the English teacher trainer curriculum is one of the most important contributing factors responsible for producing productive teachers.

Authors

Kanya Panapob (k1971joslin@gmail.com) is currently pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy (Language and Communication) from the Graduate School of Language and Communication, National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand. Currently, she is a lecturer at Ubon Ratchatani Rajabhat University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Jirapa Abhakorn (jirapaa@hotmail.com) is an assistant professor at the Graduate School of Language and Communication, National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand. She obtained her Doctorate Degree in Education, Communication, and Applied Linguistics from Newcastle University, UK. Her areas of interest include English language teaching, English language education policy, language teacher training, and language classroom interaction. Some of her notable works include the study of classroom interaction and thinking skill development, pedagogical functions of teacher talk, English language curriculum design and development, and English language teacher professional development.

References

Al-Dersi, Z. E. M. (2013). The use of short-stories for developing vocabulary of EFL learners. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*, *1*(1), 72-86.

Alptekin, C., Erçetin, G., & Bayyurt, Y. (2007). The effectiveness of a theme-based syllabus for young L2 learners. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *28*(1), 1-17.

Bialystok, E. (1997). The structure of age: In search of barriers to second language acquisition. *Second language research*, *13*(2), 116-137.

Bland, J. (2015). *Teaching English to young learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3-12 year olds*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Birchwood, M., Todd, P., & Jackson, C. (1998). Early intervention in psychosis: The critical period hypothesis. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *172*(S33), 53-59.

Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. Longman.

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge University Press.

Carter, R., McCarthy, M., Channell, J., & McCarthy, M. (1988). *Vocabulary and language teaching*. Longman.

Chithra, P. (2018). Critical pedagogy of a language through stories in a classroom. *Literary Herald*, *3*(6), 115-122.

Chou, M.-h. (2014). Assessing English vocabulary and enhancing young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' motivation through games, songs, and stories. *Education 3-13*, *42*(3), 284-297.

Cummins, J. (1981). Age on arrival and immigrant second language learning in Canada: A Reassessment. *Applied Linguistics*, *2*(2), 132-149.

Dryden, L., & Mukherji, P. (2014). *Foundations of early childhood: Principles and practice*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University.

Evans, C. (2018). Analyzing semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis: Exploring voluntary civic participation among adults. In *SAGE Research Methods Datasets Part 1*. SAGE Publications, Ltd. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526439284

Gürsoy, E. (2011). The critical period hypothesis revisited: The implications for current foreign language teaching to young learners. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, *2*(4), 757-762.

Ipek, H. (2009). Comparing and contrasting first and second language acquisition: Implications for language teachers. *English Language Teaching*, *2*(2), 155-163.

Huang, X. (2021). Teaching English through stories to Chinese primary students. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, *5*(4), 106-110.

Khamsuk, A., & Whanchit, W. (2021). Storytelling: An alternative home delivery of English vocabulary for preschoolers during COVID-19's lockdown in southern Thailand. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, *11*(1), 1-13.

Kiziltan, N., & Ersanli, C. (2007). The contributions of theme-based CBI to Turkish young learners' language development in English. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, *3*(1), 133-148.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2012). Complex, dynamic systems: A new transdisciplinary theme for applied linguistics? *Language Teaching*, *45*(2), 202-214.

Lyons, J. (1968). *Introduction to theoretical linguistics* (Vol. 510). Cambridge University Press.

Machdarifah, I., & Yunita, R. (2019). The application of short stories in teaching English. In *International Seminar and Annual Meeting BKS-PTN Wilayah Barat*, *1*(1).

Mart, C. T. (2012). Encouraging young learners to learn English through stories. *English Language Teaching*, *5*(5), 101-106.

McLaughlin, M. W. (1987). Learning from experience: Lessons from policy implementation. *Educational evaluation and policy analysis*, *9*(2), 171-178.

Methitham, P. (2009). *An exploration of culturally-based assumptions guiding ELT practice in Thailand, a non-colonized nation* (Publication No. 3352431) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database.

Methitham, P., & Chamcharatsri, P. B. (2011). Critiquing ELT in Thailand: A reflection from history to practice. *Journal of Humanities, Naresuan University*, *8*(2), 57-68.

Nikolov, M., & Djigunović, J. M. (2006). Recent research on age, second language acquisition, and early foreign language learning. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *26*, 234-260.

Noom-Ura, S. (2013). English-teaching problems in Thailand and Thai teachers' professional development needs. *English Language Teaching*, *6*(11), 139-147.

Porras González, N. I. (2010). Teaching English through stories: A meaningful and fun way for children to learn the language. *Profile Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *12*(1), 95-106.

Prasongporn, P. (2016). "English Education at Primary Level in Thailand." in *English education as a foreign language: The primary level in various countries / economies*. Initial Strategy for Developing Global Human Resources. International Symposium on Educational Reform 2016. National Institute for Educational Policy

Research (NIER). January 19, 2016, Pp. 111-115. Retrieved from https://www.nier.go.jp/06_jigyou/symposium/i_sympo27 /pdf/E03.pdf.

Saengboon, S. (2002). *Beliefs of Thai EFL teachers about communicative language teaching* (Publication No. 3054384) [Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Savić, V., & Shin, J. K. (2016). Improving quality of primary English language teaching in Serbia through Theme-Based Instruction. *Improving Quality of Elementary Education*, 328-338.

Saydakhmetova, D. (2020). Teaching Russian as a foreign language through stories. *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Educational Sciences*, *8*(5), 75-78.

Sesiorina, S. (2014). The analysis of teachers' lesson plan in implementing theme-based instruction for teaching English to young learners. *Journal of English and Education*, *2*(1), 84-95.

Shin, J. K. (2006). Ten helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners. *English Teaching Forum*.

Singleton, D. (2005). The critical period hypothesis: A coat of many colours. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, *43*(4), 269-285.

Singleton, D. M., & Lengyel, Z. (1995). *The age factor in second language acquisition: A critical look at the critical period hypothesis*. Multilingual Matters.

Sokhamkaew, M. S. (2016). *Effects of the intergration of content-based instruction on Thai EFL primary students' reading comprehension* [doctoral dissertation, Thammsat University]. Retieved from http://ethesisarchive.library.tu.ac.th/thesis/2016/TU_2016_5821042479_6910_4685.pdf

Thiyagarajan, K. (2014). Integrating short stories in the ESL classroom for developing learners' communicative competence. *Language in India*, *14*(12), 671-678.

Ulla, M. B., & Winitkun, D. (2018). In-service teacher training program in Thailand: Teachers' beliefs, needs, and challenges. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, *26*(3), 1579-1594. White, R. (1998). What is quality in English language teacher education?. *ELT Journal, 52*(2), 133-139.

Widdowson, H. G. (1990). *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Wright, A. (1995). *Storytelling with children*. Oxford University.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Teaching through stories

1. Do you know the storytelling approach in teaching YLs? Have you ever incorporated it in your classroom before?
2. In your opinion, do you think storytelling is an effective method for YLs? Why or why not?
3. How would you plan the task using storytelling in your classroom?
4. How would you select the story for YLs?
5. How would you incorporate the story into your lesson? What kind of language skills would you use storytelling for?
6. Do you think there are more advantages or disadvantages of using storytelling tasks for YLs?

Teaching through theme-based

1. Do you know the theme-based approach to teaching YLs? Have you ever incorporated it in your classroom before?
2. In your opinion, do you think theme-based teaching is an effective method for YLs? Why or why not?
3. How would you plan the task using theme-based teaching in your classroom?
4. How would you select the themes for YLs?
5. How would you incorporate the theme-based teaching into your lesson? What kind of language skills would you use theme-based teaching for?
6. Do you think there are more advantages or disadvantages of using theme-based tasks for YLs?

Appendix B

Observation Checklist

Teacher No. _____   **Lesson No.** _____ **Date:** _____

Teaching Approach	Y/N	Themes	Y/N	Remarks
Learning through stories		- Use storytelling - Introduce vocabulary first - Use story includes characters, a plot, and graphics		
Theme-based teaching and learning		- Conduct activities based on a real and meaningful theme - Use a wide range of activities - Modeling activity first - Give suggestions/feedback using target language		