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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the impacts of providing English learning support for non-academic staff working in King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. Staffs working in fields other than academia lack an opportunity to practice English. To do this, a series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English was proposed. First released in March, the posters appeared twice a month in restrooms and elevators, as well as on the website. They covered such topics as news, fables, and conversations at work, sayings, and trivia. The researcher examined the impacts of this approach by surveying staff via personal interviews. The findings were as follows: (a) Staff found the posters helpful to their English revival; (b) Staff discovered their potentials to learn things; and (c) Staff felt more comfortable learning English by themselves.

KEYWORDS: Learning Support, Working Staff, English Language

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that English is widely used in academic institutions worldwide. Both instructors and students depend on textbooks written in English and the lecture is likely to be conducted in English instead of locally official languages unless students are poor in English. In this context, English is important in the academic world, or as John M. Swales (1997) put it, Tyrannosaurus rex, which signifies the domination of English as the world's leading medium of international professional communication. Academic staff are the main part of any institution. They must publish their papers in journals and give presentations in conferences, all in English, as English is accepted as the lingua franca in the academic world. Due to the fact that they must read as well as write articles in English, they have opportunities to master and practice English. Nevertheless, there are also supporting staff in every academic institution. Staff working in fields other than academia are engaged in tasks for which English is not required and due to this fact that they seldom leave the office desk and do not attend international seminars. Therefore they have fewer opportunities to master and practice English.

At present, most organizations aim to become internationally well-known. One approach in realizing this is to make the whole staff in the organization capable to speak English in order that they could communicate with people from other countries, without an interpreter and with confidence. Kathryn Pitkin Derose and David W. Baker (2000) cited an example of Lations who were negatively affected by their limited English proficiency in physician services and compared limited English proficiency as having poor health, no health insurance, or no regular source of care.

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi has been providing supporting staff with English classes after work. However, a staff member usually attends only one class during their working lifetime due to the fact that there are numerous staff members and only a small number of English instructors. A staff member shows interest and eagerness in English while studying in class. After finishing class, however, they have fewer opportunities to practice English and lose interest in it. This is in accordance with Diao Peian (2004) in that college English class fails to provide students

the strategy for practice in the off-class college English learning. To master a language, one must have opportunities to practice it. Because working staff have fewer opportunities to practice English, they could not master it. Learning institute, which is responsible for making the university a learning organization where every member always learn to improve themselves, proposed a series of bimonthly bilingual posters called 'KMUTT: I'm Learning English' as a learning support for working staff in order to examine its impacts on them.

WORKING STAFF PROFILES

According to the annual report written by the Human Resource Development Division at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi in April, 2006, there were 2 groups of staff: academic and supporting. The academic staff consisted of 713 lecturers and researchers. The supporting staff, namely the working staff, consisted of 1,077 members. In total, there were 1,790 staff members, of which 39.83 % worked in academic fields whereas 60.17 % worked in other fields. This research objective was mainly aimed at the working staff. After surveying the academic degree of the working staff, it was found that 624 of 1,077 members or 57.93 % had a Bachelor's degree. 230 members or 21.35 % had a Master's degree. It is the university's pride to have 4 members graduating from a doctoral degree. The rest or 219 members (20.33 %) had a lower degree than Bachelor's degree. King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi is mainly composed of 14 schools, faculties, institutes, and divisions. Nevertheless, the series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English covered only 7 ones.

DESIGN OF THE POSTERS

In February 2006, the series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English was proposed by Learning Institute where the researcher has been working for 2 years. This project was run under the supervision of the researcher. Since its main objectives was to provide the working staff with an English learning support, the content had to be relevant to their working daily life so that they could improve their English skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. At the same time, the content should also be concerning general interests in order that the working staff in general could read and understand it by themselves.

At first the posters appeared in restrooms and elevators. The place for posters might be inappropriate for some people; however, Learning Institute assumed that this was the most appropriate place owing to the fact that people should be able to access to learning during their free time, which might become a waste of time if they did not have anything to do during that moment. 2 months later, the same content appearing on the poster was also on the website as suggested by some readers.

As for the format of the posters, it was discussed and the conclusions were as follows: the paper size was A4 since A4 was the most widely used paper size in Thailand; there were 4 pages in total to meet the number of restrooms in each floor; body text typeface was set to 18 point in English and 24 point in Thai due to the fact that Thai characters were smaller and harder to read from a 40 centimetre distance when compared to Roman characters set to the same size; and posters were printed in colours to attract the working staff's interest.

DETAILS OF THE POSTERS

The series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English, which have been appearing since March, has presented the following information and columns as its topics: news, music, conversations at work, fables, TOEFL tests, sayings, research findings, writing guides, pronunciation tips, speaking, trivia, comic strip, and film. It should be noted here that each issue did not contain all topics cited above because there were only 4 pages of space to provide the information. Therefore, each issue would present some but not all of the above-mentioned information and columns so that there was a variety of contents which meet the audience's general interests. The three columns which appeared the most were concerning news, sayings, and trivia since these topics were the most general and everybody could read as well as understand them

without any difficulty. News was presented in the form of an excerpt from a newspaper. Bangkok Post and the Nation were chosen for this. The news items chosen had to be hot enough to attract people's interest yet it should also be a finished story so that there were no new events in the future which contradict the ones presented on the posters. Sayings were presented in most issues due to the fact that each saying was just a short sentence which was easy to remember and, at the same time, gave useful reflections to people who read it. Moreover, sayings could also follow fables.

Trivia here means anything which attracts people's general interests. Examples of trivia presented in the series were relevant to health, education, and sports. Although trivia seems insignificant to some because it was not academic, its contents were mostly related to people's daily life. Trivia was chosen in order to make people think that they could practice English with numerous things surrounding them. Each issue in the series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English had 4 pages, as stated above. Each page contained one or two pieces of information, both in Thai and English. However, the English sections were much more detailed than the Thai ones substantially because it was important to make the working staff learn English by themselves, not just read Thai translations and go without looking at English at all. Besides short Thai translations, some pages contained only Thai explanations along with English article without Thai translations. This was because some articles were already widely understood. In this case, explanations were given to the readers so that they understood the text and the structure better or they knew more words.

STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF THE POSTERS

First released in March, the series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English appeared twice a month in restrooms and elevators, as well as on the website. Although restrooms and elevators here covered only 4 buildings which were the Building of the President, Central Buildings 1, 2, and 3, there were 7 organizations in total. Moreover, these were the buildings where many people from other buildings on the campus came on errands. Therefore, the researcher was quite sure that working staff members from other departments would also have chances to recognize the posters. The release of the series was not officially announced because the researcher would like to examine the impacts of this approach by surveying staff via personal interviews. Still there was information concerning the organization supervising this project on the posters so that readers knew where the posters came from and who made them.

At the end of March, there were good responses from both working and academic staff members from those above-mentioned buildings. Then the announcement of the series was officially made.
The opinions concerning the series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English were given by 14 working staff members from 7 departments. The opinions collected from them could be grouped into 4 following topics: location of the posters, design of the posters, favourite topics, and general opinions. According to the sample, the academic posters in restrooms looked strange to them at the first place. They admitted that any posters could be pasted on the wall, but an academic one should not because most of the posters on the wall were advertisements. Later on, they got used to the posters and thought that it was good to have something to read during their waste of time.

The design of the posters issued in March and April was not quite satisfactory due to the fact that the texts were too small to be readable from a short distance. At that moment, English texts were set to 10 point and Thai 14 point substantially because the researcher used the typography for book publishing. From May onwards, the posters had to be typeset in 18 point for English and 24 point for Thai. Even though this reduced the content of the information, the working staff did not show any dissatisfaction at all since the readability was more important than the completeness of the content. As for their favourite topics, it was found that the working staff preferred news to any other topics. Still, they read conversations at work, and trivia. The general opinions of the posters in April were that there should be a website for this in order that the readers could read this series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English on the monitors at their desks, and that there should be a variety of information as well as topics appearing on the posters.

Therefore, the website was created to serve the working staff's demand. Moreover, the researcher also presented numerous interesting articles so that the working staff enjoyed reading it.

ANALYSIS OF STAFF PERCEPTIONS

The researcher interviewed informally with 14 working staff members from 7 departments on campus. Listening to and writing down the opinions given by them, the researcher interpreted the meanings hidden behind those opinions. The working staff's perceptions of the series of bimonthly bilingual poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English could lead to three interesting findings as follows: Staff found the posters helpful to their English revival: This was what the researcher interpreted from the interview excerpts given by the staff members like 'I have forgotten most grammatical rules and vocabulary and I don't think I could practice it again without the posters.', 'The posters help me understand English again.', 'At the moment, I have material to test my previous knowledge of English.' and 'It's really good for me. I can still remember something from the days of my English class.'

According to the working staff members, they all used to study English in the past and now they admitted that they have forgotten English language and that they did not quite understand English. The posters reminded them of the past when they studied English in class. Therefore, the researcher judged that the series of bimonthly bilingual poster helped them revive their English. Staff discovered their potentials to learn things: This was what the researcher interpreted from the interview excerpts given by the staff members like 'When I read the posters carefully, I could understand them completely.', 'Even though you don't translate the news into Thai, I could understand what the article says by reading the explanations and looking at the pictures.', and 'I know more when I read your trivia on the posters.'

According to the working staff members, they did not believe that they could understand the articles written in English because they might never read before. With translations and explanations, they admitted that they could understand the articles on the posters. Therefore, the researcher judged that the series of bimonthly bilingual poster helped them know their abilities to understand what they thought they could not.

Staff felt more comfortable learning English by themselves: This was what the researcher interpreted from the interview excerpts given by the staff members like 'In the past, I always think that we must learn English in class. Now I have an alternative outside the classroom.', 'English posters are fun, especially with your trivia.', 'In fact, I don't have time to study English. Now I could read and learn English during the time I waste.', 'I have never practiced my English at all since I worked here. At the moment, I have material to test my previous knowledge of English.', and 'English posters are good job! Please continue doing this so that we could read more and more.'

According to the working staff members, they had fun with the posters. They learned from the posters many interesting things during their waste of time. Although they preferred English class, they knew that they did not have time to attend but still they could read the posters. By reading, it means a person reads the article alone without the help of other people. Therefore, the researcher judged that the working staff members could learn English by themselves with the posters although they preferred to attend class.

CONCLUSIONS

The series of bimonthly bilingual English poster called KMUTT: I'm Learning English is an English learning support for staff in King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi working in areas other than academic roles. This involves with Celia Roberts (2005) in that English instruction in the workplace is not problematic and this can be negotiated with the employer since the employees need and want to learn English. The posters appeared in restrooms, elevators and on the website. The topics were news, fables, and conversations at work, sayings and trivia. The impacts of this approach were that the posters helped them revive their English, that the posters helped them know their abilities to understand what they thought they could not, and that the working staff could

learn English by themselves with the posters. Shiao-Chuan Kung and Tun-Whei Chuo (2002) also found the satisfactory results when they instructed their students to use websites for self-study. The students found that learning English by themselves was interesting. Nevertheless, the working staff admitted that they preferred to attend class. This involves with Prasit Musaw (2000) in that learners are satisfied with learning by themselves but they still need to depend on instructors since they are accustomed to learning with teacher in classroom.

SUGGESTIONS

Here are some useful suggestions for the studies in the future:
1. How well the working staff understand English when they read the bimonthly bilingual posters.
2. How the series of bimonthly bilingual poster affects the way the working staff learn English.
3. How the series of bimonthly bilingual poster affects the students if the series is aimed at them?

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