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Improving Students' English Proficiency by Remedial English Project: The Case of Kasetsart University

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ABSTRACT

This pre-and post-test one group design without a control group was carried out to investigate the effect of a remedial English project on students' English grammar ability as measured by their pre and post English grammar tests and their attitudes towards the project. Fourteen lower proficiency freshmen who failed a mid-term Foundation English I examination voluntarily took part in this 16-hour intervention. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, and a group interview was also conducted to retrieve the students' attitudes towards the project. The quantitative data were analyzed using statistical tools including mean and standard deviation, and dependent samples t-test. The qualitative data from the interview were analyzed by content analysis. The results revealed that the participants' English grammar ability as measured by their post-test scores was significantly higher than before the intervention. Results from a group interview indicated that most participants appreciated participating. Moreover, they realized the benefits of the project.

Keywords: English Remedial Course, English Proficiency, Attitudes

Introduction

In general, remediation refers to a process implemented in order to correct or improve a problem. In teaching and learning context, remediation, remedial teaching, or remedial instruction can be defined as alternative teaching and learning methods that aim to improve underprepared students who are having problems or cannot keep up with previous instruction (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). "Remedial education involves special teaching for young people who find it difficult to learn as quickly as most others" (Collins Cobuild, p. 926). Interestingly, remedial programs have been mainly constructed at university level. Kirst (1998) gives an obvious reason why the lack of connection between high schools and postsecondary institutions can cause students to fail university placement tests. Those students, therefore, must attend remedial courses. Weissman, Bulakowski & Jumisko (1997) also mention that a remedial program is a course designed for students to improve the skills necessary to complete and do well in college-level courses. Bettinger & Long (2005) define a remedial program as college coursework which aims to provide under-prepared students with the skills needed to fill university requirements. Goff-Kfoury & Ramzi (2008) state that it has been accepted in general that the prior goal for implementing remedial programs at college level is to compensate for and boost low-proficiency students' readiness and to provide skills necessary to further their study at university, mostly in mathematics and English subjects.

Research so far has been concerned with the benefits of a remedial English program. Bettinger and Long (2005) conducted a study regarding the needs of underprepared students from high school, and a remedial program at university. The study indicated that the remedial English course had beneficial effects for underprepared students. Moreover, students who

take remedial courses seem to find it easier to continue their studies at college-level. The main findings from Goff-Kfoury & Ramzi (2008) studying English remedial programs in Lebanon showed that “remediation may be required because students lack the fundamental prerequisite learning skills. University remediation programmes would then be greatly enhanced should learning and study skills methods become part of these programmes” (Goff-Kfoury & Ramzi, 2008, p. 97). Tseng & Chao (2013) also claim that a remedial program appears to increase the the students’ performance in a standardized test in an intensive form of instruction. Another indication is that an English remedial program can be used as one alternative instruction for improvement in the student’s long-term English proficiency. Luoch (2014) makes it obvious that “to deal with the rigors and quality of the preparation of high school students, it is important to address the preparedness that students get at that stage instead of overburdening university education with unnecessary remediation” (Luoch, 2014, p. 1187).

However, remedial English programs still involve some problems. Since a remedial course has a high cost, parents might not like the idea of paying twice for what students have already been taught in schools (Luoch, 2014, Goff K-foury & Ramzi, 2008, and Bettinger & Long, 2005). Moreover, Bettinger and Long (2005) suggest further, crucial negative impacts of a remedial program; i.e. 1) remedial programs can adversely affect students’ outcomes; and 2) remedial programs probably demotivate students’ while they are studying in high school. Although the students’ English or Mathematics proficiencies are underestimated, maybe they still pass the university admission and take the remedial classes provided for them.

Thailand is a country in which English is not an official language, but which, of course realizes that English is used as a means to communicate worldwide. For decades, English has been taught from the beginning primary level, or at many kindergartens. However, the National Institute of Education Testing Service (O-Net) test results reveal that high school students’ English language proficiency has been considered below-average for many years. In 2012, an average score in English was 22.13 percent; in 2013, 25.35; and in 2014, 23.44 percent (National Institute of Education Testing Service (Public Organization). Not surprisingly, when those students enter the university, some of them face problems, especially in English classes.

Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat Sakonnakhon Province Campus is located in Sakon Nakhon Province in the northeast of Thailand. The campus was initially established in order to serve students from northeastern provinces. Students from various educational backgrounds and proficiencies are accepted. Basically, students in Kasetsart University must take at least 12 credits in English subjects, or more in some majors. Therefore, Foundation English I, II, and III are provided for students to attend and they are able to choose another one or two English courses to study. In recent years, the number of students failing Foundation English I has been increasing. Such students much re-take the subject again until they pass it. One possible reason for the high rate of failure is that a large fraction of students are not ready to study at college-level. Although they are from different schools, they seem to encounter the same problem. Therefore, an English remedial course is set up to bridge the gap between high school and university.

Research Objectives

Objectives of this study were:

1. to investigate the effect of a remedial English project on students' English grammar ability as measured by pre and post English grammar tests; and
2. to study students’ attitudes towards the remedial English project.

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study were fourteen freshmen at Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat Sakonnakhon Province Campus, enrolled in Foundation English I (01355111), who had failed the mid-term exam. The students attended the remedial English course voluntarily, in a 16-hour intervention.

Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study were pre- and post-tests, and a group interview as follows:

Pre- and Post-tests. The mid-term examination for Foundation English I (01355111) was used as pre-test and post-test in this study. After students took the test, mid-term scores were announced. The students' test results were analysed to determine teaching topics and design materials for a remedial English course. The test consisted of vocabulary, grammar, dialogue, reading, and writing respectively. According to the analysis, the students performed poorest in the grammar section. Therefore, a four-week remedial course was designed to fulfil the students' lack of grammatical competency. Evening sessions were scheduled, totalling four hours per week. After the students completed the 16-hour intervention, they took a post-test, comprised of the Foundation English I mid-term examination grammar section. The quantitative data were analyzed using statistical tools, including mean and standard deviation, and dependent samples t-test.

Group interview. A group interview was conducted the day after the remedial course concluded, to retrieve the students' attitudes towards the project. The interviewer was an English lecturer, not otherwise involved in the study. In the interview, the students were asked to give opinions based on the overall teaching, and about learning English through the remedial course. The interview lasted about an hour. It was conducted in Thai, and was tape-recorded. Data from the interview were transcribed and interpreted by a content analysis method.

Results

The results are based on analysis of information obtained from two research instruments: pre- and post-test results, and a group interview. The findings are shown in two ways: students' test and their opinions towards the remedial English project. Table 1 below shows the comparison of the student's average scores and the standard deviation from pre- and post-test.

Table 1
Average scores in pre- and post-tests

| | Numbers | \bar{X} | S.D. | t-test |
|-----------|---------|-----------|------|----------|
| Pre-test | 14 | 16.19 | 4.67 | * -5.896 |
| Post-test | 14 | 22.31 | 3.88 | |

* $t(0.05, df = 13, sig. (2-tailed) = .00$

The above table revealed that the average score for the post-test had significantly improved (22.31) compared to the pre-test (16.19). The findings thus indicated that students' grammar ability had increased after taking the remedial English.

Table 2
Individual Student's Improvement

| No. | Pre-test (X1) | Post-test (X2) | Improvement (X2-X1) | Percentage |
|-----|------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------|
| 1 | 14 | 25 | +11 | 44 |
| 2 | 17 | 19 | +2 | 10.53 |
| 3 | 13 | 27 | +14 | 51.85 |
| 4 | 24 | 25 | +1 | 4 |
| 5 | 20 | 27 | +7 | 25.93 |
| 6 | 22 | 27 | +5 | 18.325 |
| 7 | 17 | 23 | +6 | 26.09 |
| 8 | 16 | 21 | +5 | 23.81 |
| 9 | 9 | 19 | +10 | 52.63 |
| 10 | 15 | 24 | +9 | 37.50 |
| 11 | 18 | 24 | +6 | 25 |
| 12 | 9 | 18 | +9 | 50 |
| 13 | 15 | 16 | +1 | 6.25 |
| 14 | 17 | 19 | +2 | 10.53 |

According to the above table, most students perform better on a grammatical post-test comparing to pre-test scores. Although there are improvements of the students' test results, some students still show very low improvement for instance student number 2, 4, 13, and 14. Therefore, the data obtained from a group interview were analysis to explain this problem.

From the analysis of the interview, the data obtained can be divided into four parts i.e. students' attitudes toward the remedial English project, a comparison between regular English class and a remedial English course, teaching time and duration, and other suggestions respectively.

Student's attitudes towards a remedial English Course

The data retrieved from the interview show that all students appreciated the project the most. Moreover, they realized the benefits of being involved in the course. The following extracts are used to support the findings.

"I like this project. From the beginning of the course till now, I understand English more."

"This project is useful for us. We learn a lot from the course and we feel more confident to study English."

"Being attended in this course enables me to review some subject contents. When I study in class but I can't keep up with it, the course helps me a lot. That's good."

The findings from the interview also reveal that the remedial English project helps some students to change their attitudes toward learning English positively. The extract below is presented to support the findings of the study.

“It’s fun to study in a remedial English course. I used to hate English subject the most. Now, it’s fun to study English. I can also do the English homework for a regular class by myself. However, I am still not confident to take the post-test.”

A comparison of between regular English class and a remedial English course

According to the data obtained from the study, the students did compare how teachers gave instructions between regular English class and a remedial English course interestingly. The results show that in regular English class, teachers always give instruction quickly and try to finish everything on time. Thus, some students cannot keep up with the lecture. A remedial English class, in contrast, teachers normally spend time teaching students carefully. They do not hurry up. And spend time to explain the language to the students slower than in a regular one. The following sample extracts from a group interview are used to support the findings.

“In normal class, a teacher gives instructions quickly. He/she won’t review the lesson.”

“Yes, I agree. A teacher in a regular class teaches too quickly. I cannot keep up with the lesson. But, this course, a teacher makes it slower, explain the language more, and give more examples.”

“I think a remedial course is much better than a regular one.”

Another interesting finding from the interview reveals that students felt more comfortable with a small class size than a normal class size. The extract below is used to support the findings.

“This class is smaller than the normal one, not too many students. I understand English more with a small group like this. When I get what the teacher has been taught, I can do the exercise correctly. This encourages me to practice more and more. When I go back home, I still would like to keep practicing English. On the other hand, if the class goes to fast and I don’t get it, I don’t want to do any homework because I cannot do it. Like my friends, we just copy from others that’s it.”

Teaching duration

Time duration was another part students raised during the interview session. The students agreed among themselves that a remedial course was quite short. They needed the project to be longer. Furthermore, they would be glad if the project would be set up in every semester. Some sample extracts from the interview are presented as follows:

“If that be possible, I’d like to have 2 more days a week for this course.”

“This project is useful. But it’d be better if the course is available every semester.”

“It would be good to take both regular class and a remedial class together. I really don’t want it to be last. Please extend the time for us.”

Other suggestions

Interestingly, the results from the interview indicate that students raise some interesting point to study in English class. Some of them mention that some useful resources for instance a dictionary, should be provided for them like in high school English class. Another comment

indicated that a remedial course should open for all interested students as the sample extracts below.

“It'd be better if there are some dictionaries provided for us. Sometimes I forget to bring my own. I have to borrow my friends.”

“I agree. Once I want to check some word meaning in a dictionary, but I leave my dictionary at home. My friend also uses it. So, I feel like I am behind, I just let it go and ignore the rest of the class lesson.”

“I have many friends who really want to attend the project. But they cannot because they pass the mid-term test.”

“So do I. The remedial English course should be open to those students as well. They are willing to attend.”

Conclusion and Discussion

This study attempts to investigate fourteen freshmen's English performance focused on their grammar ability after they had attended a remedial English course, 16 hours. The course is designed in order to fulfil students' English weakness. From the analysis of the students test results, grammar is considered to be the poorest part of the students' performance. Moreover, the students' attitudes towards the course are taken into consideration as well. According to the results of the study, most students show higher performance on grammar after taking the course. In addition, the findings show that the students had positive attitudes towards a remedial English course and realised the benefits of the projects.

On the other hand, when the performance of individual students is taken into consideration, it was found that some students showed less improvement at the post-test. From the analysis of a group interview, those students may encounter difficulty because of two reasons. Firstly, they seem to have inadequate of self-esteem. Without or lack of self-esteem, the students probably lose confident to take the test. As mentioned in the interview that one feel comfortable with studying in class and enjoy practising English but still feel uncomfortable to take the test. Researchers so far have studied on the relation of self-esteem and students language learning performance. Majority findings reveal and prove that self-esteem had significant effect on students' language learning performance positively (Chauhan, 1990; Huitt, 2004; Powell, 2005; Rubio, 2007; and Tayebinik & Putch, 2012). Second, according to data obtained from the interview, it seems that some of them aware of the advantages of other learning resources like a dictionary. However, they are still dependent on the teacher. It can be seen from the interview that one realises that dictionary is a helpful leaning tool; however, they expect the course or the teacher to provide some for them. It might be because the student was not trained how to use other resources while study in both a regular class and a remedial English class. Thus, Oxford (1989) states that to change passive or being spoon-fed students to become more self-directed learners, those students must be trained by introducing new learning strategies. According to Oxford (1989) self-directed learner refers to “a gradually increasing phenomenon, growing as learners become more and more comfortable with the idea of their own responsibility. Self-directed students gradually gain greater confidence, involvement, and proficiency” (Oxfore, 1989, p. 10).

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