

A Study of Primary School Students' English Learning Challenges in an English Program

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Abstract

This study explored the English learning challenges experienced by Grade 4 students in the English Program (EP) at a primary school in Chachoengsao Province. A total of 25 students completed the questionnaire during the second semester of the 2025 academic year, and the data were analyzed via descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. In addition, there were five students volunteered for interviews, which provided more detailed and in-depth information about the challenges they experienced in each English skill. The quantitative data indicated that students encountered difficulties across all four core English skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with the level of challenge ranging from moderate to frequent. The data indicated that listening was the most difficult skill, whereas reading was the least difficult.

Keywords: English learning challenges, four-core skills, English program

Background

English has been employed as a global language because it is widely used across the world (Melitz, 2018). In Thailand, the English language is regarded as a crucial foreign language that supports national development in the educational, economic, and technological sectors, thereby contributing to the increasing adoption of bilingual and English-medium programs across institutions (Tang, 2021).

In response to global trends, the Ministry of Education has implemented comprehensive reforms to enhance the quality of learning and strengthen students' English proficiency as part of national educational policy (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2016). These reforms emphasize early exposure to English and promote internationally oriented curricula at all levels of education (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2020; Rattanasunthorn, 2024; Prasertsri, 2020).

The four essential language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing are the language skills for English instruction, in Thailand (Ministry of Education, 2008). The researcher notice that Thai language learners have English language problems. They have trouble understanding English accents and a set of English words. The Thai language learners feel confidence when Thai language learners try to speak, but they find it hard to read English writing. To address these issues, English programs employ systematic, skill-based instructional approaches to promote language development (Ministry of Education, 2008). A balanced pedagogical framework that reduces linguistic barriers and enhances practical language use supports Thai learners in achieving functional and context-appropriate English proficiency (Ngamtrakarn & Kalaya, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Although the English language is the main language of instruction in English programs (EPs), many primary students still struggle with English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. At the targeted school, teachers have reported that Grade 4 students often cannot understand spoken English clearly, feel nervous when speaking, find reading texts difficult, and make frequent errors in writing. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the specific English learning difficulties faced by Grade 4 EP students at the targeted school to help improve their English.

Research Objective

The main objective of the present study was as follows:

1. To investigate the challenges perceived by students in the English program regarding the following four English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing

Research Question

The research question of this study was as follows:

1. What are the challenges that students in the English program encounter in terms of the four English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

Significance of the Study

The present study aimed to ascertain problems of Level 4 English programs, a primary school in Chachoengsao Province, concerning the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The findings were anticipated to be used by teachers to help pinpoint problem areas, select instructional strategies and develop more focused and productive learning experiences. By fully

engaging them in the study, it also strongly motivated their own efforts to improve their English. In addition, the results provide useful implications for curriculum developers and school management in fostering English language teaching and learning implementation within the program.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) builds its theory on how human beings acquire languages other than their first languages. Long's (1983, 1996) interaction hypothesis suggests that input and output are instrumental in language acquisition, especially the process of meaningful interaction. According to Mackey (2012), this type of interaction develops students' oral and written fluency, accuracy and confidence. Pica (1994) emphasized that in conversational negotiation, feedback is immediate; therefore, learners can refine their language production.

According to Krashen's Monitor Model (1982, 1985), the best way for an L2 to be learned is by being provided with comprehensible input at slightly above one's current level. Krashen (1985) also claims that low-anxiety listening and reading provide opportunities for grammar and vocabulary to be implicitly acquired. Both linguistic development and communicative competence are served by these routines.

English Programs

In the Thai context, English programs (EPs) implement English as the main medium of instruction across multiple subjects, including mathematics, science, and social studies (Ministry of Education, 2008). According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), this immersion increases learners' exposure to authentic English. Grabe and Stoller (2011) reported that consistent engagement with reading materials improves vocabulary, comprehension, and critical thinking. The Ministry of Education (2008) also emphasized that ongoing writing practices develop students' ability to structure and express ideas clearly.

The Thai English Program (EP) uses English as the main language of instruction for all courses within the curriculum (i.e., math, science, and social studies) (Ministry of Education, 2008). Richards and Rodgers (2014) reported that this type of English medium instruction (EMI) gives learners the opportunity to be exposed to many real English. The Ministry of Education (2008) reported that reading regularly enhances the vocabulary acquisition of learners, as well as their comprehension and critical thinking, as pointed out by Grabe and Stoller, (2011). Writing

continuously also enables students to arrange and express their thoughts properly, according to the Ministry of Education (2008).

Challenges of Learning English

1. The Four-Skills Model

Many English language learners have trouble in each of the four primary areas of language skills. Brown (2021), indicated that while the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) can be separate skills, they are also interdependent and need to be learned in conjunction with one another. Vandergrift and Goh (2012), explain that most students will experience difficulty in listening as a result of unfamiliarity with the sounds of the language, rapid delivery and/or varied accent; MacIntyre (2017) explains that many students will face speaking challenges as a result of limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, lack confidence and/or fear of making errors; Duke & Carlisle (2011), state that reading challenges include both decoding unfamiliar words and understanding complicated sentence structures; and Swain (1985), and Myhill, Jones, and Wilson (2013) state that writing requires linguistic knowledge, cognitive organizational ability, and fine motor skills to develop as a writer.

Motivation and Anxiety

Affective factors also influence the process of learning a language. According to Gardner (1985), motivation is the most critical factor in learners' involvement. Horwitz (2001) stated that language anxiety impairs skill performance overall. Khamkhien (2010) noted that Thai EP students may do well in reading but show poor results in speaking or listening because of nervousness and a lack of confidence. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) confirm anxiety as making one struggle, especially with listening comprehension, if some accents or rates of utterance are unfamiliar. According to Swain (1985), writing problems are often limited in vocabulary and disorganized in terms of ideas.

Methodology

Research Design

This descriptive research explored the difficulties of English learning among Grade 4 students in an English program at a primary school in Chachoengsao Province. This investigation was conducted through a survey in which data were collected by the use of a questionnaire. The design thus allowed for a systematic exploration of the students' difficulties related to all four

language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Descriptive analysis was used in an attempt to identify not only the most frequent challenges, but also the relative levels across the skills.

Population and Sample

The population involved in this study consisted of 72 Grade 4 students attending the English Program at the targeted school in Chachoengsao Province; these students were divided into three classes. From this population, a purposive sample of 25 students from only one class was taken to learn about general problems in learning English. In addition, five volunteers from those 25 students participated in individual interviews to obtain further information on their background and problems regarding the development of the four basic English skills in the English program. All the participants joined voluntarily, and personal details were not disclosed.

Research instruments

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was designed to measure the English learning challenges of Grade 4 EP students. This instrument consisted of two parts: the first part was about demographic information, and the second part comprised 19 items assessing difficulties with four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For all participants to accurately fill out the questionnaire, it was translated into Thai. The content validity was assured via expert review and a tryout with 25 students. Its reliability was established using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient of .79, indicating acceptable consistency among the items.

The interviews were carried out after the students had finished the questionnaire. Five of the 25 fourth-year students agreed to participate in this interview. This interview aimed to obtain more specific information from the questionnaire on problems related to listening, speaking, reading, and writing English. All the interview questions were prepared in Thai for better understanding. Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher reviewed and refined them for clarity and accuracy to obtain specific English learning difficulties of the students in the English program.

Data collection

Data collection was carried out for a week in the second semester of the 2025 academic year with the permission of the school director. The five-point Likert scale questionnaires were therefore distributed to the targeted students with prior explanations of the purpose of the study. Five students who completed the questionnaires later volunteered for tape-recorded interviews to provide qualitative insights further into investigating and elaborating on the challenges in English learning in

the four skills identified from the survey. All interview questions were prepared and refined in Thai to ensure that they were clear, easily comprehensible, and reflected the research objectives.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were obtained from the closed-ended questions of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire and were analyzed via SPSS. The purpose of the analysis was to determine the differences in the experiences and perceptions of students regarding the challenges to learning English associated with the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing within the program. Further processing of the data was executed with Microsoft Excel, and the results are reported as the means with standard deviations.

Results

Challenges faced by Students in Developing Listening Skills in English

The analysis of the listening skills of Grade 4 English Program students revealed that they experienced a generally high level of difficulty.

Table 1 *Challenges faced by students in developing their listening skills in English*

Statements	Mean	SD	Level
I do not understand when the teacher speaks English.	3.65	0.59	High
I cannot remember new vocabulary from listening.	3.95	0.69	High
I feel anxious when the teacher or classmates speak English quickly.	4.05	0.83	High
I do not understand when the teacher speaks English with an unfamiliar accent.	3.20	0.98	Moderate
Total average mean score	3.71	0.55	High

Students experienced the greatest challenges in listening when confronted with rapid speech ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.83$) and difficulty remembering new vocabulary ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.69$). Understanding the teacher's English ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.59$) also posed considerable difficulty, whereas comprehension of unfamiliar accents ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.98$) was moderately challenging. Overall, listening was perceived as a highly demanding skill ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.55$).

Challenges faced by Students in Developing Speaking Skills in English

Students in the English program experienced a high level of difficulty speaking.

Table 2 *Challenges faced by students in developing their speaking skills in English*

Statements	Mean	SD	Level
I feel embarrassed when speaking English in front of the class.	3.65	0.81	High
I am not confident about my English pronunciation.	3.50	0.76	Moderate
It takes me a long time to think of the English words I want to say.	3.55	0.94	Moderate
I do not speak English fluently.	3.65	0.75	High
I am afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, so I do not dare to speak.	3.85	0.81	High
Total average mean score	3.64	0.52	High

Fear of making mistakes ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.81$), embarrassment ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.81$), and lack of fluency ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.75$) were identified as the primary barriers. The secondary challenges included uncertainty about pronunciation ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.76$) and taking time to recall words ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.94$). Overall, students' speaking difficulties were rated high ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.52$).

Challenges faced by Students in Developing Reading Skills in English

The findings for reading indicated that the students reported a moderate degree of challenge.

Table 3 *Challenges faced by students in developing their reading skills in English*

Statements	Mean	SD	Level
I do not understand the English texts that I read.	3.45	0.94	Moderate
I cannot infer the meanings of new words in a reading passage.	3.45	0.76	Moderate
I can identify the main ideas or details from what I read.	3.35	0.75	Moderate
I can read only short English sentences.	3.60	0.60	High
I read English slowly.	3.40	0.75	Moderate

Total average mean score	3.44	0.46	Moderate
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Students reported moderate difficulties in reading, particularly when they handled longer sentences ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.60$). The comprehension of texts ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.94$), inferring the meanings of unfamiliar words ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.76$), identifying main ideas ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.75$), and reading slowly ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.75$) were also moderately challenging. The overall reading difficulty was rated as moderate ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.46$).

Challenges faced by Students in Developing Writing Skills in English

The findings concerning students' writing skills indicated a generally high level of difficulty.

Table 4 *Challenges faced by students in developing their writing skills in English*

Statements	Mean	SD	Level
I take a long time to think about what I want to write.	3.50	0.76	Moderate
I often make grammatical errors when writing in English.	3.80	0.83	High
I often misspell English words.	3.60	0.81	High
I have opportunities to write in English only during classroom activities.	3.70	0.92	High
I lack confidence in writing in English.	2.95	0.94	Moderate
Total average mean score	3.51	0.54	High

Writing posed significant challenges, especially in making grammatical errors ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.83$), misspelling words ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.81$), and having limited opportunities to practice outside the classroom ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.92$). Moderate difficulties in taking the time to plan writing ($M = 3.50$, $SD =$) and a lack of confidence in writing ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.94$) were observed. Overall, writing was perceived as a high-challenge skill ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.54$).

Discussions and Conclusion

Listening

Students' use of helpful compensatory strategies, such as listening to keywords, using situational clues, asking someone to repeat, and asking for an explanation, was moderate. This would indicate that students do actively try to solve their listening problems.

There were also significant difficulties in understanding rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, and idiomatic expressions commonly employed by the teachers. During the interviews, most explained that learners usually use visual cues, contextual understanding, and repetition to grasp spoken English, which means that their listening skills are still under development. The present finding is supported not only by other Thai research, such as that conducted by Thepvongsa and Klinchan, (2020) but also, by immersion experiences throughout more extensive areas of Asia, as learned from Verbeke and Simon (2023). These studies have all continually shown that the same challenges with processing naturally fast-spoken English were taking place among learners in both the EP and EFL programs.

Speaking

These problems involve the use of various strategies by the students, such as mentally rehearsing responses, relying on learned expressions, and appealing for help from peers or teachers. Although these strategies reveal the active management of anxiety by learners, their limited exposure to a variety of speaking situations constrains their fluency and spontaneity in communicating. Thus, a low-pressure environment coupled with thoughtfully structured speaking activities is what students need to overcome affective barriers.

Speaking was the skill that students considered most difficult to learn, mainly for affective reasons: anxiety, embarrassment and lack of self-esteem. Students were afraid of making mistakes, very often restricting their oral production to utterances familiar to them. The students expressed fear of making mistakes and often restricted their verbal output to familiar phrases. These observations are aligned with Horwitz (2001), and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), who emphasized the significant role of foreign language anxiety in oral performance, and with Thai studies highlighting limited practice opportunities as a constraint on EP students' speaking development (Suwannarak and Chumworatayee, 2020; Kongkaew, 2021).

Reading

Students actively manage reading challenges by employing strategies such as identifying key terms and contextualizing of new content. Even though they engage with the texts, the results indicate a critical need for structured lessons in both vocabulary acquisition and advanced reading strategies that will support comprehension and provide a foundation for solid reading confidence.

Reading was thus moderately challenging, especially with longer or more complex texts and unfamiliar vocabulary. The students mentioned the difficulties in inferring word meanings and understanding abstract ideas. The interviews provided information on reliance upon illustrations, contextual clues, and rereading strategies to enhance understanding. These findings correspond with previous research showing limitations in vocabulary and a lack of sufficient reading strategies as hindrances to comprehension in young EFL learners (Zhang, 2021; Nation, 2001).

Writing

The students demonstrated a moderate reliance on guided and imitation strategies, showing active engagement in addressing their writing difficulties. Nevertheless, they also try actively to improve. Perhaps due to their limited language proficiency, few opportunities are provided for them to practice writing, hindering their ability to write independently with confidence. Accordingly, it can be suggested that writing teachers should consider how best to encourage instructional strategies that work for autonomous learners and promote higher self-efficacy in writing.

Writing was classified as a very difficult skill to develop by students. The main problems students had been their grammatical correctness, spelling, organization of ideas and little opportunity to practice aside from classroom assignments. The interviews with the students revealed that they were more comfortable writing texts with a model to follow. Another thing that the students were more comfortable with throughout the process was writing with help from their peers and teachers. This shows that when writing these texts, students wanted a set structure to adhere to. According to Webb and Nation (2017) and Chen (2022) research, students want help from teachers and more opportunities to practice when writing.

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