The Effects of Practicing the Past Simple Tense through Storytelling and Grammar Practice Techniques

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to examine the effects of storytelling practice and grammar practice on assisting grade 10 students to learn English past simple tense, and to explore the students’ opinions toward practicing the past simple tense through storytelling and grammar exercises. The participants were 40 grade 10 students at a school in Sisaket during the academic year 2015. The students were organized into two classes; each contained 20 students, one were trained through storytelling activities and the other through grammar exercises. Research instruments consisted of identical pre-test and post-test, a questionnaire and interviews related to their selection of tense for each verb slot in the post-test. Findings indicated that both practices were indifferently effective in enabling grade 10 students to learn past simple tense, and the students had positive opinions on both practices.

Keywords: storytelling practice, grammar practice, past simple tense
Introduction

Grammar is fundamental for teaching and learning language because it supports students’ abilities to form sentences correctly (Jones, Myhill & Bailay, 2012). Many researchers investigated Thai students’ English grammar competency and found that their proficiency is quite low. The correct use of tense was shown to be especially difficult for them (Tawilapakul, 2001).

Like countless Thai EFL learners, tense has been found to be a problem for many grade 10 students. Students seem to be confused when they use English tense in communication, remembering the rules for tense use but frequently employing incorrect tense forms when they use those rules in context. This confusion is likely to result from different temporal expressing system between Thai and English. In English, time is realized through verb inflection and implies tense in the sentences. In the Thai language, verb inflection does not exist, and time is expressed through context and time phrases, such as yesterday and tomorrow. Due to this discrepancy, verb tense errors can be serious when non-native speakers of English try to use tense to refer to the time of a situation (Hinkel, 2004).

To tackle the problem, the proposed techniques for teaching grammar are transformational grammar, repetition, drills and sentence parsing. In Thailand where the Thai language is dominant, grammatical forms are basically taught using a traditional technique in which the teacher gives and explains the rules and forms to the students, then the students are asked to do grammar drills and exercises.

Storytelling is another teaching technique recently started to be widely used in Thai contexts. This technique encourages students whose first language is not English (FL/L2) to use and learn the language through interactive activities. Egan (1999, cited in Srihasarn, 2010) indicated that storytelling is a good linguistic approach, allowing L2 learners to share and/or express their personal understandings to others. Moreover, storytelling can motivate students to learn and create meaningful communication and develop positive attitudes to learning the second language. Wright (2010) asserted that storytelling is an essential technique to support learners’ progress in the second language, providing and reinforcing several semantic fields and grammar. The learners are able to learn new vocabulary and grammatical rules through meaningful contexts and develop emotional intelligence.

The fact that the Thai language is dominantly spoken in this country, that explicit instruction has been principally used in English classrooms, and class time is very limited, teaching grammar rules is unavoidable in Thailand. However, L2 learning and development is believed to largely depend on practice. Therefore, the present study was designed 1) to determine the effects of storytelling practice and grammar practice on assisting grade 10 students to learn English past simple tense in limited class time and 2) to explore the students’ opinions toward practicing the past simple tense through storytelling activities and the grammar exercises.
Literature Review

1. Simple Past Tense

Basically, past simple tense expresses an action which happened in the past. That is, the time of event is usually before the time of speaking. It describes the events as a whole, with no change or development. Examples of past simple tense are presented as follows:

(1) A definite single completed event/action in the past:
Example: I attended a meeting of the committee last week.

(2) The event can be remoted in time:

(3) With states in the past:
Example: He owed me a lot of money. (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freman, 1999: 114)

Based on the examples above, simple past tense is used when the speaker wants to conceptualize a completed event factually some time before the time of speaking (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freman, 1999: 114).

Ayoun and Salaberry (2008 as cited in Chiravate, 2011) illustrated past simple sentences as follows:

(1) Mark read the entire book.
(2) She drank wine.
(3) They played/used to play tennis when they were children.

The verbs ‘read’, ‘drank’ and ‘played’/ ‘used to play’ in these illustrations are in the past tense. The events occurred in the past or were completed in the past. Sentences (a) and (b) indicate the actions were completed in the past; the expression started and finished at specific times in the past. Sentence (c) shows a habit in the past; the sentence refers to an action or habit usually occurred in the past.

Moreover, simple past tense is commonly used with time expressions which refer to the past. The use of past time expressions is illustrated as follows:

(1) I saw him yesterday.
(2) Last year, I traveled to Japan.
(3) Two years ago, she came to Germany.

(Shoebottom, 2015: http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/pastsimp.htm)

There are past simple forms: regular and irregular. The regular past simple form of verbs takes place when a verb is added with the regular simple past morpheme –ed (sometimes –d if the verb ends in letter -e) to signal past time, while the irregular form refers to verb inflection when a verb is not added with the morpheme –ed, for example, go/went, /do/did, drive/drove/ (Pinker, 2011).

The relationship between the acquisition of regular and irregular past tense forms seem crucial for language acquisition. It relates to over-regularization and recovery (Karmiloff-Smith, 1986 as cited in Shirai, 2003). Overregularization refers to the phenomenon which learners try
to learn or acquire verb inflection and their acquisition becomes retrieval error. For example, learners are known to make past tense forms of irregular verbs by adding past tense suffix–ed (for example, goed, eated) and later they recover the error forms. Overregularization is treated as the paradigm case of rule learning. However, if learners can internalize a rule, forms such as goed and eated may disappear (Shirai, 2003).

2. Grammar Translation Method

Larsen-Freeman (2000) proposes the grammar translation method as a way to help students to read and appreciate foreign language through the learning of grammar rules and vocabulary of the target language. Grammar translation method is a way of studying a language through detailed analysis of its grammar rules. The students have to apply the knowledge to the task of translating sentences from the target language to their native language, or vice versa. The students are taught to translate vocabulary, sentences and passages from one language to another using grammar rules and examples provided by the teacher. If the students can translate from one language to another correctly, they are considered to be successful language learners. First language is generally allowed to use during instruction, and the teacher has full authority in the class. Students are asked to memorize the grammar rules and apply them to other examples where morphology and syntax are emphasized. Grammar is taught deductively; the presentation and study of grammar rules are practiced through translation exercise. Grammar translation method is still widely used in the situation of understanding literacy texts which is primary focus of foreign language learning.

3. Storytelling

Telling stories has long been a common and effective channel of human communication. Thus storytelling as a teaching technique can be viewed as an activity bringing L2 students to practice the L2 in much the same way as L1 learners do. There are several types of storytelling such as narrative (e.g. personal expressions, myths and folktales and short stories), descriptive (e.g. descriptions of a place) and persuasive (e.g. advertisements, compare-contrast, cause-effect and describe-concluded texts). Stories introduce new vocabulary as well as sentence structures, thus they are believed to be advantage for language acquisition as one of the practical and potent techniques to stimulate ideas and personal experiences which can be used in the classroom. Storytelling can be used in many ways for teaching, depending on teaching purposes. Nonetheless, the main principle of storytelling is telling the story to the other (listeners). This encourages students to practice the learned words, grammar rules and structures by trying to remember words, and perhaps grammatical structures either consciously or subconsciously, to be used later when retelling the stories. The more they practice, the more exposure to the words and forms they will get, and the more likely they may better learn and understand them.
4. Previous Studies on Using Storytelling and Grammar Learning

Many studies indicated the effectiveness of the use of storytelling for learning English and motivating students’ English acquisition.

Soleimani and Khamdan (2013) studied the effects of teachers telling short stories on the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures of high school students in Iran. The participants were 30 intermediate students. They were separated into two groups. The explored grammar point was conditional sentences (type III). The control group was taught traditionally while the experimental group was taught by telling short stories. The study indicated that telling stories had a positive effect on learning grammar, but there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of the acquisition of grammatical rules and structures.

Chalak and Hajian (2013) investigated the use of storytelling as a creative teaching technique to address pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners’ difficulty in producing the utterance grammatically. The participants were 45 Iranian EFL learners. They were provided to three groups; two groups were the experimental groups and another one was the control group. For the first experimental group, the teacher provided the students with various real-life situation examples of simple present, past and future tenses. Explicit explanations of different positive, negative, yes/no and wh-questions focusing on written sentences were also provided. For the second experimental group, the learners received the teacher’s storytelling accompanied by questions and answers about the tenses. For the control group, the inductive and deductive grammatical instructions were provided. Pre-test and post-test and interview were used for this research. The result indicated that the second experimental group outperformed the first experimental group. This situation confirmed that storytelling improve the accuracy of pre-intermediate Iranian language learners’ oral production. The learners can produce the sentences for speaking correctly.

Tsou (2012) studied the effect of storytelling on adult English learning. The purpose was to explore the benefits of storytelling for the encouragement of participation in classroom interaction by Taiwanese English learners. The research involved 78 university students. The researcher investigated storytelling’s effects on the nature of classroom discourse, interaction, reading comprehension and story recall. The participants were randomly divided into two groups. The study period lasted six weeks and six stories were used. The control group was taught with vocabulary and language structures found in the stories, the teacher checked students’ comprehension of the story, then asked them to do written story-recalls, and practiced the four language skills with the participants. With the storytelling group, the teacher introduced the topic and activated necessary background knowledge. Next, the teacher asked the students to predict the story content and create story expectations collaboratively, and stimulated the students’ participation. The findings indicated that storytelling increased...
students’ interaction, facilitated FEL reading and story-recall writing, changed the nature of classroom discourse and provided more scaffolding interaction.

The above findings indicated that the storytelling technique seemed to be effective in the provision of second language acquisition for students in areas such as vocabulary, grammar and interaction.

Research Methodology

1. Participants

The participants were 40 grade 10 students at a school in Sisaket, Thailand. They were studying English during the academic year 2015. The school allocated two classes of students for the study. The selected students were 20 per class. One class practiced the past simple tense through storytelling activities while the other class practiced the target form through grammar practice, i.e. grammar exercises, at sentence level.

2. Instruments

1. The pre-test and post-test were the same set of test. The test consisted of 12 verb slots in eight sentences which provided as one story. The 12 verbs comprised five regular verbs and eight irregular verbs. The students had to translate the given eight Thai sentences into English and supply grammatically correct form of the past simple tense.

2. The questionnaire, given right after the posttest, comprised two parts. Part 1 asked about their opinions toward the type of practice each group received. Part 2 was open-ended in nature, requiring the students to further provide their reasons why they supplied the verb form according to the practice they had been exposed to.

3. After the questionnaire, all students were interviewed about their tense selection at the post-test. They had to explain how they decided to choose the verb form in each verb slot and what tense they supplied in the test.

4. The five stories consisted of 100-250 words. They were narratives, about festivals, including Halloween, Easter, Thanksgiving, Tanabata and Loy Kratong which were excerpted from the internet and simplified before using in the study. These stories were under the theme “celebration.” The situations in the stories also involved the past simple tense and provided examples and functions of verbs in the past simple tense. The stories included past time adverbials which drew the students to notice past tense as well as the regular and irregular past tense forms. The storytelling practice and grammar practice groups were exposed to these same five stories before they practiced the target form as instructed.

3. Data Collection

The study was conducted in six weeks’ time, 50 minutes per session, two sessions per week for three weeks. In the first session, both the grammar practice and the storytelling practice groups were asked to take the pre-test before they received grammar translation instruction on the past simple tense prior to practicing the target form with different
techniques. The grammar practice group was required to learn vocabulary then practice through grammar exercises while the storytelling practice group read the stories and did storytelling activities. In the last sessions after the treatments, they both took the post-test, completed the questionnaire and took an interview about their tense selection in the tests.

4. Data Analysis

Data from the pre-test and the post-test were analyzed using a t-test. For the data analysis, the students got 1 point if they could show that they selected correct tense choice either by supplying the correct form, e.g. ‘gave,’ or correct past simple tense morpheme despite incorrect form, e.g. ‘gived,’ but not ‘has gived.’ The present study focused on tense choice rather than correct tense form because doing so would ignore important information that some students might not yet have been fully developed their competence, but on a stage of development. The students would get 0 if they supplied incorrect verb form of any other tense although the form was correct, e.g. ‘is giving’ for ‘gave’. Data from the questionnaire and the interview were also analyzed.

Research Findings

1. Statistical Results

Results from the pre-test indicated that there was a significant difference in ability between the two groups in their use of the past simple tense (t = -2.801, p< .05), with the storytelling group having higher score. This difference indicated that comparisons of the performance of the students in the two groups were unable to be made based on the use of different teaching techniques. As a result, the study was decided to limit comparisons to only within-group analyses. Thus, the pre-test and post-test mean scores of each group were compared to explore the students’ development for using the past simple tense after each treatment.

With regard to the storytelling practice group, results of comparing the pre-test and post-test mean scores showed a significant difference between the average scores in the pre-test and post-test (t = -2.123, p< .05). This result suggested that using the storytelling technique to practice the past simple tense within four weeks could increase the students’ ability to reach a significant level.

Results for the students in the grammar practice group also showed a significant difference between the average scores in the pre-test and post-test in relation to their use of the past simple tense (t = -2.812, p< .05). These result indicated a development in the students’ ability in using the past simple tense after exposure to grammar practice.

2. Results Regarding Students’ Tense Selection

The students’ responses were categorized into four types: (1) correct tense and form, (2) correct tense but incorrect form, (3) non-target tense, and (4) incorrect form and base form. The first two were considered acceptable forms while the other two, unacceptable forms. The
data were analyzed using percentage to summarize the pre-test and post-test scores by the two groups to observe whether there was any improvement in their post-test performance, i.e. their increased ability in using the target tense closer to the correct verb form.

### Table 1 Percentages of the storytelling practice students’ tense selection categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acceptable forms</th>
<th>Unacceptable forms</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correct tense and form</td>
<td>Correct tense but incorrect form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>23.75%</td>
<td>1.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>28.75%</td>
<td>0.62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results in Table 1 showed that after exposure to the storytelling practice, the number of students who selected the correct tense and supplied the correct form increased by five percent and the number of students who used incorrect form and base form dropped by 2.5 percent. However, this practice could not enable 71% of them to use the correct tense and form.

### Table 2 Percentages of the grammar practice students’ tense selection categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acceptable forms</th>
<th>Unacceptable forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correct tense and form</td>
<td>Correct tense but incorrect form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>4.40%</td>
<td>1.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>13.75%</td>
<td>1.87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the students’ exposure to the grammar practice, more students (the increase by 9.35%) selected the correct tense and supplied the correct form. Noticeably, the number of students who used incorrect form and base form dropped dramatically, by 11.25 percent. Nonetheless, the practice could not enable 84% of them to realize the relationship of the verb form and the past time referent.

Based on results in Tables 1 and 2, with limited time constraint, grammar practice may have greater effect on improving EFL learners’ ability to use past simple tense.

### 3. Analysis of the Supplied Verb Forms

There were eight test items and twelve verb slots requiring the past simple tense in the post-test. The students’ responses were examined regarding the verb forms they supplied and the order of the verbs appeared in the test to find out how they managed to use the simple past tense with regard to tense selection and tense maintenance in the whole context.

The first few largest percentages of the students who selected the correct tense and form were found in three verb slots in the first two sentences: 45% for ‘gave,’ followed by
40% for ‘believed’ and ‘came.’ Then, the percent sharply dropped to 5% and lower in the next verb slots except ‘decorated’ in sentence 6. It is obvious that the first three verbs were supplied with the correct tense and verb forms by approximately half of the students. In other words, the students tended to use the past simple form with the first few verbs in this large past-time context. Among these three verb slots, two were located in the same sentence where a past-time adverbial ‘in the ancient time’ was given and one slot was in the next sentence.

The result indicated that there were approximately 50% of the students who could decide on the correct tense, but they could not maintain tense continuity within the same time frame. The percentage of correct tense usage was high at the first three verbs in the first two sentences, then started to drop considerably from the fourth sentence and stayed steadily low until the last verb.

4. Students’ Opinions toward the Two Practices

Regarding the storytelling practice, the students seemed to have positive opinions. They enjoyed the given activities and thought that the practice could improve their ability to use the past simple tense when they practiced the target form through iteratively listening to and saying the form. However, the storytelling seemed difficult for the students who had limited vocabulary and when the time for practice was very limited.

As for the grammar practice, the students also had positive opinions toward the practice. This may be so because the grammar practice is straightforward thus made them understand the past simple tense rules easily. These Thai students were likely to enjoy the clear and simple step-by-step nature of this kind of practice and be content with the knowledge and the ability they would gain.

Discussion of Results

As indicated by the dependent t-test results, both practices, storytelling and grammar practices, could enhance the students to use the past simple tense. That is to say, either explicit instruction reinforced by storytelling practice or by grammar practice could draw the students to notice and remember the past simple form given in the stories. Each practice has its strength in its own right. Grammar practice allowed the students to have a lot of chances to notice the relationship between past time adverbials and the past simple form while working on grammar exercises repeatedly during the practice periods. Repeated practice could facilitate direct grammar teaching (Carless, 2009).

Similarly, retelling the stories also helped increase the students’ ability to use the past simple tense. While the students were reading the stories, they were receiving new vocabulary and grammatical form input. Then, while they were preparing themselves for retelling the stories, they were forced to recall and notice both the vocabulary and the form to be used. Yet, as the practice could only enable five more percent of the storytelling group to choose
the correct tense and supply the correct form, it is hypothesized that students might pay more attention to more salient vocabulary items than they did on less salient past tense morpheme.

However, as the results suggested, 71% of the storytelling group and 84% of the grammar group could notice the relationship between past time frame signaled by the past time adverbial ‘In the ancient time’ and the past simple form. The fact that most students in both groups did not supply the past simple tense form in the fourth verb slots onward indicated that solely making the students notice past time adverbials and learning about the correct form is not adequate, and that maintaining tense continuity should also be emphasized to students during the instruction and practice.

Next, the students’ responses regarding regular and irregular verb forms were discussed. Both groups used incorrect tense form by supplying base form. It might be that the students probably did not concern with tense, so they produced base form first when they learned tense (Housen, 2002). This was confirmed by the results from the questionnaire asking why they chose the verb form they supplied for each verb slot, supplemented by the interview results that the students who used the base form did not think much about the tense; they just tried to finish translating the given sentences as instructed. Clearly, the verbs in their base form the students supplied were not mean to indicate time, but simply functioned as lexical items the students inserted in their translated sentences.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that both storytelling and grammar practices were significantly effective in increasing the students’ ability in using the past simple tense in a limited time of four weeks. Specifically, the two practices could overall enable the students to make correct tense selection and supply the correct past simple form, however, only when a past time adverbial was locally present. Results have pointed out that teaching the form, the –ed morpheme, and prompting students to notice past time adverbials were not enough, as it could not make the students see the need to maintain the same tense as the context required. Most low ability students who did not supply the past simple form used the base form instead. Finally, the students from both groups, storytelling and grammar practice groups, had positive opinions toward the two practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

First of all, the present study was provided with only low ability students. If possible, future study may include students with higher ability or proficiency levels. This will allow the researcher to observe which practicing technique may be more appropriate for students with which ability level. Second, practicing English within a limited time may not be enough for the students with storytelling technique. Future research may then consider providing more practicing time. In fact, longer duration will allow the researcher to explore other aspects of
tense usage, especially tense continuity. Secondly, it is indeed worth finding out whether the storytelling practice could help EFL students to better express time and tense in speech than the grammar practice.

References


