



Effects of Short-term Study Abroad Program on Thai High School EFL Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge and their Attitudes towards Learning English in Phuket Province

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Abstract

This study was to examine the effect of a short-term study abroad program on Thai EFL high school students' English vocabulary knowledge and their attitudes toward learning English. The participants were 17 high school students from Phuket Witthayalai school. The instruments used for data collection process were an English vocabulary test and questionnaires. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and *t*-test analysis.

The results were as follows: 1) There were no statistically significant differences in SA students' mean scores of vocabulary test between pretest and posttest. However, SA students' vocabulary scores of the posttest were higher than pretest scores ($M = 13.29$, $SD = 2.62$, $p > 0.05$). 2) Students' attitudes towards learning English were higher compared to the prior results before attending SA in a non-statistically significant level ($M = 4.35$, $SD = .43$, $p > .05$). The findings pointed out that despite no significantly statistical differences were found in the results of this study, the short-term SA program had a positive effect in enhancing both Thai high school EFL students' vocabulary knowledge and their attitudes towards learning English.

Keywords: *Short-term study abroad, EFL learners, high school students, vocabulary knowledge, attitudes*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is an essential part in EFL learning to develop the four foundation skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing for practical use. Vocabulary significantly contributes to the establishment of words, sentences, and paragraphs in the reading context (Tiewratthanakul, 2006). With the appropriate knowledge of words, learners can establish cognitive meaning and comprehend the reading texts or learning media. This will positively contribute to the development of written and spoken language (Prasertsuk, 2012). The Office of the Basic Education Commission (2008) proposed that instructors should emphasize the importance of learning vocabulary so that their students can understand texts at advanced educational levels.

With the recent significant growth in the use of English for academic purposes and government concern under the policy of "Thailand 4.0" (Division of Research Administration and Educational Quality Assurance, 2016), various studying abroad (SA) programs have been established with the primary purpose to support Thai EFL learners to improve their English competence. In SA program, EFL learners are expected to adapt and adjust to their new cultural surroundings as part of the native learning environment process. At Thai high school level, SA programs such as AFS Intercultural Program (AFS), Youth Exchange and Study Program (YES), and AYC Intercultural Program Thailand (AYC) are occasionally arranged for Matthayom 4 to 5 (Grade 10-11) academic levels. These programs attract the attention of EFL learners as a great opportunity to study the English language through cultural knowledge exchange and thereby enhance their English competency level.

The demand to study abroad of Thai EFL learners has also increased. Most Thai SA students are expected to achieve their English knowledge for practical use. Improving the language competence of Thai EFL learners has been intensively highlighted by both academics and parents. As a result, numbers of SA programs and participants has increased significantly, with the assumption that going abroad is beneficial to hone learners' language knowledge.

Numerous claims have suggested that SA could potentially affect EFL learners through educational advancement such as language improvement (Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Sasaki, 2011; Wang, 2014). However, some scholars argued that SA did not correlate with learners' development in language competence

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(Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Grey, Cox, Serafini & Sanz, 2015; Longcope, 2003). Scant research relating to the effect of SA on learners' vocabulary development has been conducted in Thailand to verify or dispute these diametrically opposed assertions. Thus, few studies have been conducted with Thai high school students from Phuket Wittayalai school. Therefore, this study will be conducted to fill in this knowledge gap.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To study the effect of SA programs on Thai high school students' vocabulary knowledge.
2. To study the effect of SA programs on Thai high school students' attitudes toward learning English language.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study was a pretest-posttest research design to compare the effects of SA on EFL high school Thai students' English vocabulary knowledge, and to compare their attitudes toward English learning after participating in the SA program. A quantitative research was employed in this exploratory study.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 17 Thai EFL high school students in Phuket province. Phuket Wittayalai School has been purposely selected for several reasons. First, Phuket is arguably one of Thailand's largest tourist attractions, which mostly surrounded by western foreigners or travelers who communicate English as a medium language. Second, this school is acknowledged as one of the largest and well-known public high schools in Phuket. Thus, this educational institute offers the students a 2-week SA program every year. In addition, students from grade 11 were the most appropriate academic level in Thailand to prepare themselves for further English proficiency tests, such as the O-NET, the General Aptitude TEST (GAT), and the 9 Common Subjects. Therefore, these students were candidates in this study. For these reasons, the selection of the students from Phuket Wittayalai School was appropriate in this study.

3.3 Instruments

An English vocabulary test was designed by the researcher to measure students' vocabulary knowledge for both pre and posttest. The word selection to measure SA participants' vocabulary knowledge in this test was the practically and frequently used words for daily life and academic purpose with the conceptual learning area of grade 10-12 proposed by Ministry of Education (2008). The vocabulary test contained 20 items of multiple-choice answers. Furthermore, the questionnaires were designed by the researcher to measure the participants' attitudes toward English learning before and after SA period. The questionnaires were transcribed and translated from English to Thai, and vice versa for mutual understanding of SA groups. There were 15 questions covering 3 of characteristic attitudes: perceptual, affectional, and behavioral attitudes. It was designed as a 5-point Likert-type scale.

3.4 Data collection procedures

Participants were asked to sign the consent form a month before the SA program. They were asked to complete the English vocabulary pretest examination. Immediately after the pretest, the group was required to complete questionnaires to study their attitudes toward learning English a week before going abroad. Those questionnaires and answer sheets were collected by the researcher after the procedure for further analysis. The duration of the SA program lasted for 2 weeks. After SA program, the students were asked to complete the post-vocabulary test and the questionnaires to study their attitudes toward English learning. Those answer sheets and questionnaires were collected for further data analysis procedures. The overall process is shown in Figure 1.

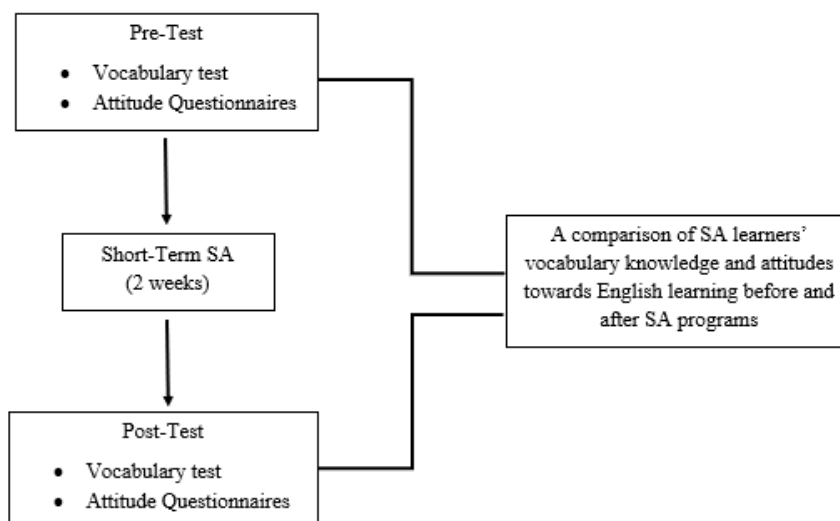


Figure 1 The procedures of data collection

3.5 Data Analysis

Pre-Post English vocabulary test scores were analyzed by mean, standard deviation (S.D.), and dependent t-test. The paired sample t-test analysis was used to determine the differences in each participant's scores.

The data from the questionnaires were scored as follows: for the positive statements, extremely agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2, extremely disagree = 1; for the negative statements, to measure the level of students' attitudes in the same way as the positive statements, the scores are reversed—Strongly agree = 1, Agree = 2, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 4, Strongly Disagree = 5. Scores of pre-post survey questions were collected separately and calculated by the mean, standard deviation (S.D.), and paired sample *t*-test to compare the participants' attitudes toward English learning before and after SA. Paired sample *t*-test analysis is used to determine whether there are differences in each participant's attitudes before and after SA program.

4. Results and Discussion

1. Vocabulary Knowledge

This section provides answers to the first study objective in order to ascertain the improvement of participants in English vocabulary knowledge. Mean scores, standard deviations, and paired *t*-test analysis are employed to compare students' vocabulary scores. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of the vocabulary scores of SA participants

Time	N	Min.	Max	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -value	df	<i>p</i> -value
Before Participating SA	17	7.00	18.00	12.82	3.45	.81	16	.43
After Participating SA	17	9.00	18.00	13.29	2.62			

Table 1 shows that there were no statically significant differences in the mean scores of the students ($t(16) = .81, p > .05$). However, the mean pretest score was 12.82 ($SD = 3.45$) while the posttest score was 13.29 ($SD = 2.62$). Therefore, the posttest score was higher than the pretest score ($M = 13.29, SD = 2.62$). The results suggest that although the differences in vocabulary scores were found in the non-statistically significant level, the short-term SA program has an effect on increasing students' English vocabulary knowledge. Specifically, the results suggest that short-term SA program could enhance students' English vocabulary knowledge.



2. Attitudes toward learning English

To study students' attitudes toward learning English after participating in the short-term SA program, the data were collected from the questionnaire and analyzed by mean scores, standard deviations, and paired *t*-test analysis. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of students' attitudes toward learning English

Dimension of Attitudes	Pre-test			Post-test			<i>t</i> -value	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Level	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Level			
Perceptual Attitude	4.19	.719	Positive	4.59	.517	Highly Positive	1.985	16	.065
Affectional Attitude	3.98	.509	Positive	4.15	.577	Positive	.948	16	.357
Behavioral Attitude	4.00	.474	Positive	4.29	.474	Highly Positive	1.400	16	.181
Average	4.05	.478	Positive	4.35	.428	Highly Positive	1.856	16	.082

Table 2 indicates that there were no statistically significant differences in students' attitudes toward learning English between pretest and posttest results ($t(16) = 1.86, p > .05$). However, their attitudes level after participating SA was higher than before attending SA in overall ($M = 4.35, SD = .43$).

According to the table, the dimensions with the highest positive level was perceptual attitude ($M = 4.59, SD = .52$) in a highly positive level, following with behavioral attitude ($M = 4.29, SD = .47$) in a highly positive level and affectional attitude ($M = 4.15, SD = .58$) in a positive level.

The results show that although no significant differences in students' attitudes toward English learning were found, short-term SA program has an effect on increasing students' attitudes toward learning English. Specifically, our results suggest that short-term SA program can enhance students' attitudes toward learning English. The overall results of the study are discussed as related to the following research objectives.

Discussion of Research Objective 1) Does a short-term SA program bring about improvements at the levels of English vocabulary knowledge in Thai high school students in any possible way?

According to the findings of the current study, no significantly statistical differences in the gain of vocabulary knowledge were found. This may be due to the short-term duration of SA program as it has been set to two weeks in this study. However, SA students obtained higher scores on the vocabulary posttests compared to the pretests. This revealed that Thai high school EFL students' English vocabulary knowledge appeared to be improved by a short-term SA program. The results of this study were similar to the study of Klassen and Green (2019) and the study of Grey et al. (2015). Their findings indicated that the students' vocabulary knowledge was non-statistically increased after enrolling short-term SA program. The findings are similar to the idea given by Wong and Dornyei (2013). Their study claimed that the short period of SA program may insufficient to determine the significant difference in SA students' language and vocabulary knowledge. The findings are also in accordance with Longcope (2003). He said that it depends on the duration of SA program to influence the significant gains in students' language and vocabulary knowledge.

Although non-statistical statistic results were found in this study, the posttest vocabulary results of SA students were higher than the pretest results. It could be discussed that the gain of vocabulary knowledge in SA students were possibly affected by the environment and settings of SA. The findings are in line with the study of Sans (2014). She indicated that SA environments were the exposure input to enhance the growth in learners' vocabulary knowledge acquisition. Similar to the ideas of Dwyer (2004), Freed (1998), and Kinginger (2008), those factors enabled students in broadening their language learning experiences, which possibly including their vocabulary acquisitions. The results are also similar to the discussions of Amuzie and Winke (2008), they reported that the SA environment may shape the learners in their vocabulary learning. In addition, the host family was considered as one of the potential factors to help increasing SA students'



vocabulary knowledge in this study. The findings of this study may in line with the findings of DuFon (2006). He reported that the activities between SA students and host family may help the learners obtain the new vocabulary. Like the ideas of Borrás and Llanes (2020), homestay with host members was beneficial for learners to take advantage of vocabulary gain during a short-term SA period. Concordantly, Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown (2012), their vocabulary acquisitions obtained through social engagement with host family such as daily conversation, manners, cultural exchange, lifestyles, et cetera.

Discussion of Research Objective 2) Does a short-term SA program possibly enhance Thai high school EFL students' level of attitudes toward learning English in any possible way?

The results demonstrated that there were no statistically significant differences in students' attitudes towards learning English between pretest and posttest results. This may be due to the two-week SA duration has been set in this study. However, it was found that the short-term SA program had a positive effect on students' attitudes toward learning English. The findings were in contrast with the study of Amuzie and Winke (2009) which reported that SA students' attitudes toward their learning English were significantly increased than before enrolling SA program. However, the discussion of this study is in accordance with the study of Harris (2014). His findings stated that the investigation to observe the gain in SA students' attitudes toward using English language brought to inconclusive as no significantly statistical results found. Similarly, the findings of Paris, Nyaupane, and Teye (2014) suggested that students' gain in attitudes toward learning English depended on individual expectation and experience. Due to those factors, students' attitudes may not be determined significantly after attending SA program.

Although no statistical differences of SA students' attitudes towards learning English were found, the study showed that the gain of SA participants' attitudes in posttest results was higher than the pretest results. The discussion suggested that SA surroundings and settings could possibly affect SA students' positive attitudes. This discussion may in accordance with the study of Pinar (2016) regarding the effect of SA surroundings and settings on EFL learners' gain of attitudes level. Kinginger (2008) also reported the consistent findings with this study that SA surroundings such as the local community have an impact on SA students' attitudes toward learning English. Similar to the idea of Dwyer (2004), he explained that the different living conditions under the short-term SA context may affect learners' attitudes than domestic learning. Furthermore, the host family could possibly have positive effects on SA students' attitudes toward learning English during the enrollment of SA program. The discussion is consistent with the study of Isabelli-García (2006). Her findings displayed that SA students' attitudes toward language learning could be enhanced by engagement and interaction with the host family. The findings of this study may also in accordance with the study of Jackson (2009). He explained that the host family enables him to provide the learning experience which may increase sojourners' attitudes toward language learning. As the study of DuFon (2006), he reported that the host SA context may trigger SA students' attitudes to be more determined in learning English.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study points out that two weeks of short-term SA experience could not bring significant change on Thai High school students' vocabulary knowledge and attitudes towards learning English language as no significantly statistical results shown in both posttest scores of vocabulary test and attitudes questionnaires despite the positive effects on enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge and attitudes toward learning English were shown in this study.

Suggestions

Several suggestions are proposed for further studies. The researcher suggests that further study should increase the number of sample groups as it could possibly strengthen the findings. Thus, further study should be conducted with a larger sample size of participant group which may be beneficial in gaining more credible information and results. Furthermore, the studies should be conducted with other grade levels of students or other groups of participants in different educational institutes or different areas in Thailand. In



addition, the length of the short-term SA period should be extended within a month as the minimum requirement in order to strengthen prior findings. Finally, further study or the investigation of the homestay environment and host family under SA context should be provided.

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