



## Factors Related to the Development of the Twenty-First Century's Foreign Language Learning Potentialities of Elementary School students in Phon District, Khon Kaen Province

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### Abstract

The of this mixed-method designed research was to study factors related to the development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's foreign language learning potentialities of elementary school students in terms of the schools' policies, problems in the policy administration, the schools' curriculum administration, problems in the schools' administration, the teachers' roles and class management, problems in class management, the students' roles, and the knowledge they can apply in their lives.

The target group was 56 schools in Phon District under Khon Kaen Primary Educational Service Area Office 3. The samples were 48 schools selected by single-stage cluster sampling. Four sets of five-level closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires based on Likert's and unstructured questions were used to collect the data from the deputy directors of academic affairs, heads of the departments, teachers, and the sixth graders of each school.

The deputy directors revealed that the schools followed the policies of the Ministry of Education at a high level in all aspects. Their problems were the unmatchable policies and practicalities, the change of the curriculum and its impracticalities, the shortage of teachers, the non-English major teachers, the teachers' lack of time to improve the lessons, the students' lack of motivation, abilities to speak the language, and readiness to study. The deputy directors wanted all these problems to be solved accordingly.

In reference to the information from the department heads, it was found that the main content of the curriculum was at a high level whereas the language content in relation to other subject areas was at a moderate level. Their administration problems concerned the curriculum change and its inappropriateness for small schools, the shortage of English major teachers, the teachers' chances to improve themselves, the students' lack of sufficient vocabulary and abilities to communicate in the language, and their lack of confidence in speaking because they were afraid of making mistakes.

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As for the teachers' roles, they were found at a high level in all aspects. Regarding the teaching, the teachers strictly followed all indicators of the curriculum at a high level. Their problems were the lack of native speakers, the inappropriate teaching materials, the students' different backgrounds, their lack of basic knowledge and motivation in seeking further knowledge.

The students' realization of their roles was at a moderate level in all aspects. The students also learned more via the Internet, the libraries, and extra lessons. The knowledge they could apply was at a moderate level, except for following the orders, requests, and suggestions, which was at a high level. The students recommended the schools provide more computers (76.20%), time to read English books in the libraries (40.10%), more Japanese and Chinese books in the classrooms (36.70%), and more Thai textbooks (11.40%). For class management, they recommended pleasant learning atmosphere (56.40%), displays of students' work (55.00%), speaking the foreign language (44.10%), watching foreign movies (39.60%), inviting native speakers to class (34.20%), and foreign language performing (32.70%).

**Keywords:** The twenty-first century, Foreign language learning potentialities, Elementary school students

## 1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the Ministry of Education emphatically states that Thai students have to "be ethical; love being Thai; be skillful in analytical thinking, creative, technological motivated, cooperative to work with others; and able to live with other people peacefully" (The Ministry of Education, 2008, p.2). In order to carry out education to be in accordance with the policies on the development of Thai students to be well-equipped for the twenty-first century, the Ministry of Education puts a great emphasis on qualifying their education to be responsive to popular and social needs. They must have potentialities in competitions and cooperation in the global society (The Ministry of Education, 2008). Thus, in foreign language learning, they must be well-equipped with these four areas of content: (1) language for communication, (2) language and culture, (3) language and relationships with other areas of learning

content, and (4) language and relationships with communities and the world.

Due to such specifications, the researchers wanted to study what the school administrators, heads of the foreign language departments, and foreign language teachers have done for their students to accomplish them.

## 2. The Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research was to study factors related to the development of the twenty-first century's foreign language learning potentialities of elementary school students in terms of (1) the schools' policies (2) problems in the policy administration, (3) the schools' curriculum administration, (4) problems in the schools' administration, (5) the teachers' roles and class management, (6) problems in class management, (7) the students' roles, and (8) the knowledge the students can apply in their lives.



### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1 The Target Group

The target group was 56 schools in Phon District under Khon Kaen Primary Educational Service Area Office 3.

#### 3.2 The Sample Group

The researchers used Krejcie and Morgan's means of determining the sample size, and thus 48 schools were selected by single-stage cluster sampling.

#### 3.3 The Research Tools

##### 3.3.1 Four Five-scale Questionnaires

These four five-scale questionnaires were used to collect the data from the deputy director for the academic affairs, the head of the foreign language department, the foreign language teachers, and the sixth graders from each school for the quantitative phase. Each questionnaire was based on Likert's five rating scale, with both closed-ended and open-ended items.

The first questionnaire was for the deputy director for the academic affairs. It was divided into two parts; part 1 was about the respondent's status, and part 2 was about the school's policies on the administration of the foreign language curriculum so as to develop the students into the world of the twenty-first century.

The second one was for the head of the foreign language department. It was divided into two parts; part 1 was about the respondent's status, and part 2 was about the administration of the foreign language curriculum. The main content in part 1 was related to the four areas of content: language for communication, language and culture, language and relationships with the

main content of other subject areas, language and relationships with communities and the world. All items of each area were the same as those specified in the Ministry of Education's Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008. Additionally, there were two more items questioning if there were other foreign languages besides English for the students to take, and what foreign languages the department let them take.

The third one was for the foreign language teachers. It was divided into two parts; part 1 was about the status of the respondent; part 2 was about the teachers' roles and his or her class management to cover the content and language skills according to the foreign language curriculum benchmarks specified in the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008.

The last one was for the sixth graders. It was divided into three parts; part 1 was about general information about the student: gender, age, and the language/languages they were taking; part 2 was about the students roles; and part 3 was about the knowledge they could apply. In terms of the knowledge gained, the items were the same as those indicators for the sixth graders specified in the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008.

##### 3.3.2 Four Sets of Unstructured Questions

These four sets of unstructured questions were applied to collect in-depth data from the informants from each school: the deputy director for the academic affairs, the head of the foreign language department, the foreign language teachers and the sixth



graders. They were meant to collect the first-hand information for the qualitative phase.

The first set of the unstructured questions was composed of three questions requesting the deputy director for the academic affairs to give (1) detailed descriptions of the problems in administering the Ministry of Education's policies on the foreign language curriculum, (2) problems in administering the school's own policies on the foreign language curriculum (if any), and (3) suggested means to find solutions to the problems.

The second set of the unstructured questions was composed of two questions requesting the head of the foreign language department to provide (1) descriptions of the problems in managing each foreign language curriculum, and (2) suggested means to find solutions to the problems.

The third set of the unstructured questions was composed of four questions requesting the foreign language teachers to give (1) detailed information about native teachers of the languages offered at school, (2) the languages they used in class, (3) the problems they encountered while teaching, and (4) suggestions or suggested solutions to the problems.

The last set of the unstructured questions was composed of two questions asking the students to specify (1) what they would like the school to provide more for them, and (2) what activities they would like their

teachers to organize in teaching them the foreign language.

### 3.4 Data Collecting

The questionnaires, together with a letter of cooperation from the College of Asian Scholars Vice President to the director of each school requesting for his/her permission to allow the deputy director for the academic affairs, the head of the foreign language department, the foreign language teachers, and the sixth grade students to answer the questionnaires and the unstructured questions, were sent to all sample schools via mail. There more letters – one to the head of the foreign language department one to the foreign language teachers, and another one to the students – were also sent to each school. Returned envelopes were prepared for all the respondents and the informants to send the questionnaires and the answers back to the Faculty of Liberal Arts, the College of Asian scholars by the requested date.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

In analyzing the quantitative data, the researchers followed the following steps:

- (1) Checking on the complete questionnaires
- (2) Using a software page to analyze the data
- (3) Using descriptive statistics to analyze the data from the complete questionnaires for frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.



The criteria for the data interpretation were:

The Scale	Interpretation
4.50	the highest
3.50 – 4.49	high
2.50 – 3.49	moderate
1.50 – 2.49	low
1.49	the lowest

In analyzing the qualitative data, the researchers followed these steps:

- (1) Analyzing all segments
- (2) Classifying the topics and information
- (3) Summarizing concepts and themes of the information classified
- (4) Presenting all in descriptive writing

#### 4. Research Results

4.1 The Results from the Deputy Directors for the Academic Affairs

For the responses to the additional unstructured questions requesting for more information on the problems of their administration, the deputy directors mentioned that the problems related to the curriculum were that it was changed quite often; it was not in line with the school context, and the teachers did not have enough time to develop it to match the context of the school; in addition, it did not respond to the needs of students' daily lives.

As for the problems in administering the foreign language curriculum at school, the deputy directors emphasized that they were facing problems concerning the language personnel, the students, and modern

technology. In terms of the language personnel, they said the schools lacked personnel with good knowledge on foreign languages. Some English teachers were not English majors when they were in college. Moreover, there were not enough language teachers at school. The students also caused problems, for they had problems in speaking or expressing the language learned, not to mention their lack of readiness for learning because they were not continuously prepared to learn the language.

To help find solutions to the problems, the deputy directors have given these suggestions:

- (1) The policy must be set in line with the language curriculum.
- (2) There must be more foreign language teachers.
- (3) Language training programs must be provided for language teachers.
- (4) There must be textbooks which correspond to the curriculum, context and goals of the school.
- (5) A distance learning technology (DLIT) should be supervised and applied.
- (6) There must be extra-curricular activities.
- (7) Technological media must be provided.



(8) The students must be taught more speaking and reading skills.

(9) Cooperation with other organizations in communities should be organized.

#### 4.2 The Results from the Head of the Department of Foreign Language.

Out of 48 sets of questionnaires, only 11 returned (22.41%) Four of the department heads (36.40%) are males and seven (63.60%) are females aged between 56-60 (4=36.40%), 36-40 (3=27.30%), 51-55 (2=18.20%), 31-35 (1=9.10%), and under 31 (1=9.10%). Nine of the heads (81.80%) are bachelor's degree holders: five in English, three in Thai, and one in mathematics. The other two heads are masters' degree holders: one in educational administration and the other one in curriculum and instruction. Four of them (36.40%) have been holding this position for 21 years; another four have been working as department heads for 6-10 years; the other three have been holding the position for a different period: one (9.10%) for 1-5 years, one for 11-15 years, and another one for 16-20 years.

In terms of the main content required in the curriculum, the information reveals that the heads of the departments followed the main content specified in the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 at a high level in all aspects, except for the use of the foreign language according to the native cultures and its use in connection with other learning areas for the students to develop, seek more knowledge and have wider visions, which were at a moderate level.

Besides English, the heads of the departments said they offered three more foreign languages. Six schools offered Chinese; three offered Japanese; and two offered Laos.

As for the problems in administering the foreign language curriculum, they can be classified into three categories. The first one involves the change of the curriculum which was inappropriate for small schools. The second one involves the foreign language teachers. Some of the English teachers did not take English as their major subject when they were in college. They did not have a chance to improve their knowledge of English. They were not trained to teach English, nor did they pursue more knowledge of English. For Chinese and Japanese teachers, they lacked knowledge and understanding of how to teach a foreign language. The last but not least was the problem concerning the students. They did lack the knowledge of vocabulary for communication. They did not dare to speak English; they were afraid to make mistakes, and they were not confident about using English vocabulary.

In terms of solutions to the problems, the department heads recommended several means of problem solving: (1) the school authorities should recognize the importance of foreign language teaching, (2) the curriculum should fit into the school context, (3) there should be at least one teacher whose major in college was English for each level of English teaching at school, so he/she can share his/her experience with students, (4) all foreign language teachers should be trained how to teach a foreign language, (5) the school should hire a



native speaker of the language as a teacher, and the teachers should analyze each student's problems before teaching.

#### 4.3 The Results from the Foreign Language Teachers

Only three foreign language teachers returned the questionnaires and answers to the unstructured questions. Two teachers are females, and one is a male. Two of them are between 51-55 years old, and the other one is over 56. Two have been working for 26 – 30 years, and the other one has been working for 31 – 35 years. All three of them realized their roles as teachers specified in the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 ( $\bar{X}$  = 4.23, S.D. = 1.24). For class management, they taught the students in line with the benchmarks required by the Ministry of Education as specified in the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 at a high level ( $\bar{X}$  = 4.18, S.D. = 1.37).

In response to the unstructured questions, the teachers stated that they did not have any native speakers working with them. In terms of problems related to the teaching or class management, they can be put into three categories. One was the lack of teachers who are native speakers. The second one was about mediums of instruction. There were not various types of mediums the teachers could use in their teaching. The last one concerned the students' backgrounds of English. The students in upcountry districts had different backgrounds in English; they did not have enough backgrounds from lower classes. Not only that, they did not seek more knowledge by themselves.

The possible solutions from the teachers concern the student only. They suggested that firm background in English be provided for students from grade 1, and that it must be developed continuously until the students are in grade 6.

#### 4.4 The Results from the Students

Out of 300 questionnaires, 202 were returned (67.33 %). Among them, 104 were males (51.50 %), and 98 were females (48.50 %). One hundred and fifty-nine students were at the age of twelve (78.70 %), and 43 of them were at the age of eleven (21.30 %). One hundred and ninety students took English (94.10 %), and twelve took Chinese (5.90 %). All students realize their roles as learners at a moderate level in this order: (1) setting goals, planning, and being responsible for one's own learning, (2) interacting, working, and doing activities with groups and the teacher, (3) summarizing what has been learned by oneself and applying it in various situations, (4) analyzing and synthesizing what is learned, (5) continuously evaluating one's own learning, (6) searching for more knowledge via the Internet, (7) searching for more knowledge in the library, and (8) searching for more knowledge by talking special lessons elsewhere. In terms of the knowledge the students gained and could practically bring into use, the information reveals that what they could practically put into practice at a high level is following orders, requests, and suggestions.

The rest of the content taught is at a moderate level as shown in the following order: (1) following orders, requests, and suggestions read, (2) speaking asking for and giving information about oneself, friends, one's family,



and relevant, (3) participating in language and cultural activities according to one's own interest, (4) comparing and contrasting between the festivals, celebrations, and traditions of native speakers and those of Thais, (5) identifying main ideas and answering questions when listening and reading conversations, simple tales and stories, (6) conversing with others, (7) identifying the similarities/differences in saying different types of sentences, using punctuation marks, and putting words in order according to the structure of the foreign language and that of the Thai language, (8) using the language to communicate in a variety of situations both in class and at school, (9) reading aloud short passages, tales, and poems properly, (10) using words, tones, and proper manners of native speakers, (11) using commands, requests, asking for permission and giving advice, (12) searching and collecting words related to other areas for oral/written presentation, (13) giving information on festival/important days, celebrations, native speakers' way of living, (14) speaking to give information on surroundings, (15) speaking to express feelings about relevant matters, activities, with brief reasons, (16) asking for help, accepting, and refusing help in simple situation, (17) choosing or specifying sentences or short information to match pictures, symbols, or signs read, (18) writing to ask for and give information about oneself, friends, one's family, and relevant matters, (19) writing to give information on one's surroundings, (20) writing to express one's feeling about relevant matters, activities, with brief reasons, (21) drawing diagrams, charts, and tables showing the information heard or read, (22) writing to correspond with others, (23) using the

foreign language to search for and collect information, (24) writing to ask for help, accepting, or refusing help in simple situations.

For the responses to the additional unstructured questions, the students have made several requests that they think can help them learn a foreign language better as follows:

1. The school should provide more computers (76.20%)
2. Let them read more English books in the library (40.10%)
3. Let them read Chinese/Japanese books in class (34.70%)
4. Let them read supplementary Thai books (11.40%)

In terms of teaching and learning activities, they would like the teachers to arrange the following activities for them:

1. Creating enjoyable classroom atmosphere (56.40%)
2. Displaying students' good pieces of work (55.00%)
3. Playing foreign language games (54.00%)
4. Listening to foreign songs (45.50%)
5. Speaking the foreign language in class (44.10%)
6. Watching foreign movies with soundtracks (39.60%)
7. Inviting a native speaker to talk to them in class (34.20%)
8. Performing plays in the foreign language (32.70%)

## 5. Discussion

5.1 The school policy concerning the administration of the foreign language curriculum





to develop students' potentialities to fit into the world of the twenty-first century.

All the schools have implemented the foreign language administration according to the policy of the Ministry of Education. However, some problems have occurred for the policy has not been in line with the school context, and the curriculum has often been changed. Besides some other problems have occurred; they are the problems of the school, for example, the lack of foreign language teachers/personnel. Thus, the school has to let other teachers with a degree in other fields teach the foreign language, especially English. Due to that fact, the teachers are unable to adapt the foreign language curriculum of the Ministry of Education to match the school context. Needless to say, the lack of foreign language teachers significantly affect the preparation process of the foreign language for students.

Though the school administrators have recommended solutions to the problems, some of them, e.g. the ones concerning the policy and curriculum the lack of language teachers or the personnel, need related superior authorities to help solve them. The problems within the school, e.g. the teaching-learning management, the school administrators should be able to carry them out by themselves.

## 5.2 The foreign language curriculum management

The schools have managed the foreign language curriculum to cover the four criteria of main content specified by the Ministry of Education at a high level, except the one on the language content in relation to the main

content of other learning areas, which is at a moderate level. The heads of the foreign language department comment that the problems occur, for the curriculum has been changed quite often. Moreover, it does not fit into the context of small schools. The lack of language teachers adds more problems. Certainly, all problems directly affect the students' learning. The heads of the foreign language department have suggested means to solve the problem, that the school must recognize the importance of this content area and provide the foreign language department with corresponding language teachers must be trained how to teach the language. Moreover, it would be even much better if there are some native speakers of the language to teach at the school. Actually, this is what the students (34.20%) have mentioned in their suggestions. Having some native speakers at school is one way to offer chances for students to actually practice more of the language, which is good for language learning according to Thorndike's Connectionism Theory (Behaviorism, 2013)

In addition, the heads of the foreign language department have suggested that the language teacher analyze individual student's problem. This is considered a principal principle that the Ministry of Education has required as a major role of language teachers to conduct so that they can develop the students' learning potentialities in line with the principles of humanism which enable students to fully develop their potentialities (Khaemance, 2012)

In terms of activities related to vocabulary learning suggested by the heads of the foreign language department, they are



certainly beneficial for students because knowing vocabularies, their meanings, and how to use them can lead to meaningful communication. That is how learners can learn a foreign language as Paul suggests in the case of English learning (Paul, 2006)

### 5.3 The roles of teachers

The foreign language teachers have realized their roles as specified in the Ministry of Education's Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 at a high level. They have arranged language activities in accordance with the learning concepts of the twenty-first century stated by the Ministry of Education, but one of the obstacles to the teaching-learning arrangements is that the lack of teachers who are native speakers of the language. This, of course, the teachers have mentioned in their proposed solutions to the problem so that the problem so that the students' potentialities can continuously be develop, and it is in line with the notions of foreign language teaching (Paul, 2006) the role of teachers specified in the learning management in the Basic Core Curriculum 2008, and the findings of research studies on the foreign language teaching-learning at the elementary school level, which could help students enjoyably and continuously learn the foreign language. For example, a study by Nootate (2012) on the teaching of the verb to be by using songs could make school students enjoy the lesson; no only that, their learning behavior was changed in a positive way with better learning achievement. Another example is a study by Qui and Sirisawat (2011) who created relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere with compliments, smiles, and clapping as rewards for

their fourth graders' performances in Chinese learning on Pinyin, greetings, numbers, family, food, RMB (Chinese currency), and weather. They reported that the students could learn well and efficiently apply what they learned in everyday life.

### 5.4 The students' roles and the practical knowledge gained

The students have realized their roles as language learners specified in the Basic Core Curriculum 2008 at a moderate level in all aspects. The teachers, who have been the closet to the students and have carried out learning activities for students, should therefore find means to assist them to realize more of all related learners roles to fulfill the teachers' specified roles (The Ministry of Education, 2008).

In terms of practical knowledge, the only skill the students specified the level of practicality at a high level is following orders, requests, and suggestions. The rest of what they have learned is at a moderate level. Thus, it is the teachers' duty to consider their roles and discuss what the students have suggested with the school administrators and related authorities to find solutions for them to reach higher achievement.

As students, the sixth graders have proposed suggestions to the school and teachers to provide friendly classroom atmosphere and a variety of learning activities to help them learn more. What the students have asked for is in agreement with some research findings which could lead learners to gain more from their language classroom. Gasuwan and Jadupot (2013) studied the efficiency of English songs on fifth graders' learning retention of vocabulary,



and the speaking skill of fifth graders and reported that teaching activities with English songs could help students learn the language with better understanding, retaining the vocabulary studied, and capability to speak fluently. Plianpram and Narkjun (2015) studied sixth graders' vocabulary learning using games in teaching them nouns, verb, adjectives, and prepositions of place. They reveal that the students were satisfied with the activities; they could learn more about the vocabulary at a high level; they could understand the lessons better, and they happily and cooperatively participated in the learning activities.

## 6. Conclusion

This research study reveals some major problems concerning the teaching of foreign languages to elementary school students though personnel involving in foreign language education. Therefore, these problems should be thoroughly taken into consideration if the students' foreign language potentialities are meant to be developed in this century.

## 7. Suggestions

Further research studies should be conducted on:

7.1 The development of students' foreign language learning according to the indicators of other levels

7.2 Different teaching methods to improve students' learning abilities at different level

7.3 The development of foreign language curricula for different levels of students

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