



Differences in quality between Thai and international research articles in ELT

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A B S T R A C T

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This study seeks to explore potential problems of English Language Teaching (ELT) academics in Thailand in getting their research published in international journals. Using content analysis, the study analyzes and compares 100 research articles published by ELT academics in Thailand with 100 research articles published in international journals. To analyze the articles, 25 specific quality categories, manifesting five generic aspects of quality are used. The main findings from the chi-square analysis comparing the two groups of the research articles reveal that five out of six quality categories associated with the literature review and two out of four with the discussion were shown to be significantly different with large effect sizes. The ratings in these seven categories suggest that the articles published by the academics in Thailand are of lower quality. The findings also show that these seven categories fall into three of the five generic quality aspects, namely, justification, awareness, and coherence. Possible explanations for the comparatively low quality of the Thai research articles include conflicts between national research policies and academics' motivations for conducting research and national cultural values, issues that may also apply to academics in other peripheral countries.

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1. Introduction

Since English became established as the dominant language of international research publication (Curry & Lillis, 2010), a substantial body of research has been produced devoted to the use of English in research articles (see Uzuner, 2008). Such interest has been intensified by the use of research articles published in international journals as a benchmark of research quality (Curzan & Queen, 2006; Li & Flowerdew, 2009) and by the number of research articles published in such journals being used as an indicator of university ranking status (Curry & Lillis, 2004).

The use of research articles as the basis for research and university assessment has influenced higher educational policies and missions internationally such as in Australia (Soutar & Murphy, 2009), Korea (Cho, 2009), South Africa (Pouris & Pouris, 2010), and Thailand (Sombatsompop et al., 2010). Studies that investigate the number of research articles in international journals by country reveal that most research publications are from core countries (e.g., the US, the UK) which dominate the

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production of international research publication (Dekeyser, 2010), with peripheral countries (such as Iran and Thailand) underrepresented (see Salager-Meyer, 2008; Zuengler & Carroll, 2010). This research publication imbalance has prompted universities in many peripheral countries, which previously focused on teaching and paid little attention to research, to require their academics and PhD students to seek publication in international journals (Huang, 2010). While such policies have led to an increase in the number of submissions of articles from peripheral countries, they have not resulted in a concomitant increase in the number of articles accepted for publication (Zuengler & Carroll, 2010). In this paper, we examine whether the quality of research articles may be a reason for the low number of publications in international journals by English Language Teaching (ELT) academics from one of the peripheral countries, namely, Thailand.

2. ELT research productivity in Thailand

Thailand has employed several strategic plans to increase the number of research articles in international journals. Examples of these include the establishment of the National Research Fund in 1992 to promote research in the country, the establishment of the Royal Golden Jubilee Program in 1996, and the establishment of the Office for National Education Standards Quality Assurance to be responsible for assessing universities (see Chalapati, 2007). However, these strategies seem to have had little impact as academics in Thailand still produce only a small number of research articles in international journals (Sinlarat, 2004). In this study, since it is impractical to investigate the problems in international publications in all disciplines, we focused on one discipline where the gap between the numbers of articles published in local journals and in international journals is particularly noticeable: English Language Teaching (ELT).

Despite encouragement and pressure from the government for academics to publish internationally, the number of published research articles in international journals in the field of ELT originating in Thailand is small. The data from the Scopus database between 2000 and 2010 show that academics working at Thai universities published only 28 articles in international journals (ranking 39th from 123 countries) with only 16 academics representing 13 universities (out of 142 universities) being corresponding author. Over the same time period, there were around 50 articles about ELT published by local academics in local journals or conference proceedings per year, giving a total of 550 locally published articles for the same timeframe. At present, there are around 50,000–60,000 university lecturers in Thailand, of whom around 8–10% teach English, giving a total number of university lecturers teaching English of up to 5000. A survey of English lecturers working in 23 Thai universities by Padgate and Syananondh (2006) revealed that 65% of respondents had conducted research (with most conducting 1–5 studies). Since the information about the time period was not given in the study and the number of respondents was low (75), we will be extremely conservative in generalizing this finding. If this 65% had each conducted only one study in the last ten years, the 5000 university lecturers in total would have conducted 3250 studies. Only around 18% of these would have been published in any form with less than 1% published in international journals.

This indicates that ELT academics in Thailand have problems in getting their manuscripts published in international journals, as do academics from other peripheral countries. Problems related to getting published in international journals have been of interest in academia. Uzuner (2008) reviewed 39 empirical studies related to problems in getting published in international journals in such countries, including Hungary (Curry & Lillis, 2004) and Iran (Hasrati, 2005), in various disciplines such as applied linguistics (Shi, 2003) and science (Gosden, 1996). The review revealed several main problems: lack of time; lack of resources or funds; lack of connections with the academic community in core countries; bias against scholars from peripheral countries; parochialism (i.e., “failure to show the relevance of the study to the international community” Flowerdew, 2001, p. 135); problems with language; and problems with the literature review and discussion sections of research articles. Another potential problem which is not considered in the study concerns problems with research methodology (Collins & Dagenais, 2010). This literature does not directly concern problems with publishing research in international journals faced by ELT academics in Thailand, but, since many of the problems are common to various disciplines (e.g., lack of time or research methodology), and since researchers in many peripheral countries face the same challenges as identified by several editors of journals in applied linguistics (e.g., parochialism or problems with the literature review) (see Collins & Dagenais, 2010; Zuengler & Carroll, 2010), it seems likely that the problems of ELT academics in Thailand will be similar.

However, based on the large number of unpublished research studies conducted, we can say that neither lack of time nor lack of resources is the main constraint preventing local ELT academics from publishing in international journals. Lack of connections with academics in core countries is also unlikely as every year several well-known ELT researchers from core countries are invited to give presentations in conferences or lectures in Thailand. Bias against scholars from peripheral countries can be challenged by Gosden's (1992) and Flowerdew's (2001) studies, suggesting that journal editors treat all submitted manuscripts equally. Problems with language can be discounted for two reasons. Firstly, researchers may receive language help from English proofreaders or reviewers (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003). Secondly, the perceptions of feeling disadvantaged when publishing papers in English depend on writing proficiency and field of study (Cho, 2009). In this study, since the target group is ELT academics in Thailand who teach English at universities, their English proficiency should be at an acceptable level.

Remaining potential problems that cannot be disregarded are parochialism (Flowerdew, 2001), problems with the literature review and discussion sections of research articles (Flowerdew, 1999; Pupipat, 1998), and problems with research methodology (Collins & Dagenais, 2010). These issues are worth exploring further. The last two (problems with literature review and discussion sections, and problems with research methodology) are the focus of this study, and we will return to the issue of parochialism in the discussion of the findings.

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