SWOT Analysis: Remedial English for Undergraduates-January to March 2018

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Abstract

This paper discusses the SWOT (strengths-weakness- opportunities-threats), analysis of the course titled 'Remedial English for Undergraduates' conducted from January to March 2018 by the teachers of NULC, Naresuan University. This course was conducted for students who failed to reach the A2 level (Elementary English level) in the six reference English levels; CEFR-(Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which is the most commonly used international standard of reference for assessing language ability. The aim of the SWOT Analysis is to measure whether course objectives were met as well as to initiate meaningful changes and improvements to the course for future reference. The course is analysed in depth in terms of its internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. Based on the themes and the data that emerged from the SWOT analysis future recommendations for course content and schedule improvement are made.

Keywords: Remedial English, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats

Introduction

Remedial programmes have been used in schools and higher educational institutions as a way to remedy the issue of below average skill competencies in students. According to Weissman et al (1997) a remedial class is offered for students "...to gain the skills necessary to complete college-level courses and academic programs successfully." On the other hand Bettinger et al (2005) claims that a remedial course in higher education is a class taken to fill or to compensate for what has been miss-learned or not learned altogether. Thus, it appears that the general and accepted goal of remedial programmes is to increase skill competencies of students with poor mathematical skills, language skills or any other required skill that is lacking, prior to taking courses necessary to meet university graduation requirements.

This is based on the idea that some students are in need of extra help in order to participate in a competitive manner in university programs on offer. Most often, remedial classes in English and Mathematics are conducted in universities as these two core subjects are regarded as gatekeeper subjects (Goff-Kfouri & Ramzi, 2008). This is evident in Thailand where the effects of not having proper English skills has led students

to be solely dependent on their teacher and the notes given by their teacher as their level of English is not enough to learn and explore any subject material written in English on their own. This defect is highlighted by the fact that most of the articles and sources of information are available in English (Noom-Ura, 2013). As a way to remedy this pressing issue, some universities in Thailand such as Chiang Mai University, Thammasat University, Mahidol Univeristy etc. have started conducting remedial classes in English for students who are in need of extra language guidance. 'Remedial English for Undergraduates' conducted from January to March 2018 by the teachers of NULC, Naresuan University is another such attempt to help students reach A2 (Elementary Level) in their English proficiency. The course emphasized reaching A2 level as this is the minimum standard of English proficiency recognized by the various faculties and divisions of Naresuan University, Thailand (Naresuan University English Proficiency Criteria, 2018).

Research Aim

The aim of this SWOT analysis is to initiate meaningful changes and improvements to the course for future reference via an in-depth analysis of internal weaknesses and strengths as well as external threats and opportunities. In order to meet this research aim, the following research objectives are used:

1. To explore the internal strengths and weaknesses of the course

2. To explore potential external opportunities of, and threats to the course

3. To assess whether the course objective: ensuring that the course participants reached A2 level, was met

In order to meet these objectives a SWOT analysis is conducted using the data collected via individual SWOT charts prepared by the teachers who taught this course as well as by analysing students' evaluations of this course.

According to (Johnson et al., 1989; Bartol et al., 1991 & Rahim, 2002), a SWOT analysis which can be defined as the investigation of an organization or a programme's internal strengths and weaknesses, its environment, opportunities, and threats; enables the development of new policies, changes and improvements, maximizes the advantages and opportunities while removing threats and weaknesses. When a SWOT analysis is correctly applied, it is possible for a university programme to get an overall picture of its present situation in relation to its impact on the students. Moreover an effective SWOT analysis gives rise to an understanding of external factors, (comprised of threats and opportunities), coupled with an internal examination of strengths and weaknesses. Thus, such foresight would translate to initiating competent programs or replacing redundant, irrelevant programs with innovative and relevant ones (Balamuralikrishna et al, 1995).

 The following research questions will be used to meet these aims and objectives in an effective and successful manner.

Research Questions

1. What are the internal strengths and weaknesses of the remedial course?

2. What are potential opportunities and threats that arise in relation to this course?

3. Was the course objective met?

Significance

Remedial classes in English have been conducted in universities around the world but very few of these classes have been assessed for their impact on the students' language improvement, in particular in Thailand. It is unfortunate that many studies have been carried out on various related topics such as testing the level of English proficiency, exploring the reasons for Thai students' poor English proficiency, the attitudes of Thai students to English Language learning, etc. in Thailand, (Metcalfe et al, 2013) & Suwanaroa, 2011). Moreover, at the time of this study, very few accessible studies have been carried out to assess the impact of remedial English classes conducted in a Thai university setting. Thus, it is believed that the SWOT analysis done on the remedial English course for undergraduates conducted by Naresuan University Language Centre will be used as a benchmark for a further set of studies necessary to fill the research vacuum in the area of English remediation in university settings.

Literature Review:

Though remediation has been around since the beginning of the 19th century (Weissman et al, 1997) and it has been used in Asia including Thailand, not many studies have been carried

out to evaluate the impact of these courses on the students and their performance. When looking at some of these available studies that have been carried out to study the impact of remediation, a study done by Luoch (2014) gets foregrounded. He studied the impact of remedial English on the improvement of English proficiency in the United States international university-Africa. This quasi experimental study which used a pre-test and a post-test to measure the effect of an English remediation programme on 46 students found out that there was a positive improvement in the level of English proficiency among the students after they completed the remedial programme. This study is similar in terms of its scope to the present SWOT analysis as both studies focus on tertiary level remedial courses. However the similarities seem to end there as Luoch (2014) carried out a quasi-experimental study while the current research is done in the form of a SWOT analysis. Moreover a similar study carried out by Zhai & Skerl (2001) determined that such courses are effective in increasing the success rate of students enrolled in regular English courses and consequently in the retention and increase in graduation rates. Contrary to these positive outcomes on remediation, are the results of a study done in a Lebanese private university (Nasser et al, 2008). They investigated whether remedial courses affect the enrolment decisions of pre-admission students and whether remedial English courses helped students to increase their ensuing English and academic performance. The findings show that a large number of remedial placements in the university programmes discouraged students from enrolling in the university. It was also found that remedial courses were not effective in helping students perform better in general academic subjects. Thus, it seems that not enough research evidence exists to make conclusions

about the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of remediation in tertiary education.

On the other hand, when talking about the use of SWOT in evaluating an educational programme, Danca (2006) claims that a SWOT analysis accomplishes the task of making educators aware of what is expected of them or their course by assessing its strengths (what the course can provide), weaknesses (what the course does not provide), opportunities and weaknesses (possible positive and negative environmental trends for the course). Osgood (2006) suggests that the results of a SWOT analysis can be the basis for further strategic planning and improvement to a particular educational programme or organization. In fact one of the main driving forces behind carrying out a SWOT analysis on the remedial English programme conducted by NULC was the fact that its results could be used as a basis for positive changes and improvements to the programme in the future. A SWOT analysis similar to the one that is in focus, has been carried out in Myanmar where an E-Learning Course offered by the University of Technology, Yatanarpon Cyber City was analysed by taking stock of the reflections of the students and the teachers (Khaing et al, 2015). This research work recommends a new pedagogical framework for ('before', 'during', and 'after') course operation at this university.

When comparing Khaing et al's (2015) SWOT analysis with the SWOT analysis in focus, the two analyses show similarities in terms of the focus as both studies focus on specific courses offered by tertiary educational institutions. However the similarities seem to end there as Khaing et al's study (2015) dealt with an E-Learning course whereas the present study deals with English remediation. Thus, it seems

that there is a research vacuum, especially in Thailand where remedial language courses offered by higher educational institutions have not been properly analysed or measured for their effectiveness in improving students' language proficiency. This lack of valid empirical studies means that there is a dire need for fresh research on remediation in Asia in order to develop a model to identify and examine the success of remedial programmes. Thus, it is believed that this SWOT analysis will pave the way for further research and analysis in the field of language remediation in Asia and in particular, Thailand.

Methodology

This chapter discusses the research approach and research design, the data collection tools, sampling techniques used and the possible limitations that may occur in this SWOT analysis.

Research Approach and Design

This research was carried out in the form of a SWOT analysis as a qualitative research.

Data Collection

Data was collected using a SWOT chart prepared by the researchers based on a SWOT analysis template developed by Mike Morrison (Morrison, 2018). In order to support the data gathered through the SWOT analysis, secondary data in the form of student quiz records, name lists and student feedback forms were used.

Course Synopsis

The remedial English course was taught by 8 teachers in total to a population of approximately 414 registered students..

This course was taught with the objective of helping students gain enough English proficiency to reach A2 level. The course was offered to students who failed to reach A2 level at the NUSET (Naresan University English Test) test they took prior to registration.

Sample

The 8 teachers who taught the remedial course were selected as the sample for this SWOT analysis. Homogenous purposive sampling (Non-probability sampling) strategy was used when selecting the sample for this SWOT analysis.

Procedure

The secondary data was gathered prior to, during and after the remedial course while the SWOT analysis was conducted after the course by asking the teachers to do individual SWOT analyses of the course. Then, the researchers used thematic and coding analysis to identify recurrent themes in the data gathered, in order to make future recommendations and to measure whether the course objectives were met.

Limitations

The SWOT analysis was conducted primarily based on the data provided by the teachers of this course. While secondary data was used to support the data collected through the SWOT analysis, it is likely that the data gathered may be affected by the researchers' biases and their preferences.

Data analysis:

Table 1- The summary of the SWOT Analysis

University: **Naresuan University,Phitsanulok, Thailand**			
Course/project in focus: **Remedial English for Undergraduates (January-March 2018)**			
Registered students - 414 students who attended regularly- 90			
Students who took the NUSET after the course - 87 (A2 Level - 30 / B1 Level- 2 /A1 Level - 55)			
		INTERNAL	
		Strengths	**Weaknesses**
		People (teachers, students) -8 qualified foreign teachers with previous experience of teaching Thai students	**People (teachers, students)** -Inability of students to attend classes regularly due to time constraints and extra activities
			Resources
			Innovation & Ideas/syllabus
		Resources -Modern classrooms	-Lack of proper follow up and completion of tasks
		-Handouts and lesson material given free of charge to the students every day.	

		Innovation & Ideas/syllabus -Availability of a comprehensive syllabus and lesson material developed by the teachers NUSET Marketing (communicatio ns) -The students were notified of the classes through the NULC website and social media outlets. Operations (day to day running) -Willingness of the teachers to stay from 5pm to 7pm without extra pay for 4 days a week while doing weekend classes and day time classes.	Marketing(communicat ions) -Lack of official communication outlets to properly contact the students Operations(day to day running) -The organizers of the course had to cancel classes for two weeks due to midterm exams and the GET/PAT exams. -Neither the teachers nor the organizers were informed prior to the GET/PAT exams about classroom unavailability	E X T E R N A L	Opportu nities -Weak students get ample opportun ity to improve their language skills and reach A2 level -The need for English proficien cy of students in the university	Alternatives / Strategies -Raise awareness among students about the remedial course and its benefits	Alternatives / Strategies -Weak students might not be willing to participate in extra classes due to fear of failure, fear of loss of face and lack of motivation.
				Threats - Inconve nient time slot (5pm - 7pm)	Alternatives / Strategies -Offering this course as an optional course within the 8-4 time in the 3rd term	Alternatives / Strategies -Difficulty in obtaining permission to offer this course in the third term

Discussion

As discussed in table 1, the general themes emerging from the SWOT analysis are as follows: The programme in its current format has many strengths, including qualified and willing teachers who are ready to teach late in the evening, and students who were willing to participate on their own without any reinforcement from their respective faculties or teachers. A well prepared course syllabus and the availability of NUSET (to be used as a pre and a post-test), further strengthens the programme.

Weaknesses identified included unpredictable student attendance due to students' faculty activities and an inconvenient time slot given for the course (5pm-7pm) and the difficulty in contacting students when needed.

Opportunities for the course included the growing need for English Proficiency in the university and the need for similar courses with fixed time slots and fixed venues. Finally, threats identified included an inconvenient time slot and venue as well as the lethargic attitude of students who are not willing to attend classes if not made mandatory by their faculty.

Thus, when calculating the threats, opportunities, weaknesses and strengths it can be said that the strengths and opportunities stand out. Therefore it can be ascertained that the course objective of providing remediation to students who failed to reach A2 level was fairly met.

Recommendations

- It would be beneficial if this course is offered as a mandatory programme for students who do not get adequate grades (below A2 level) for the Fundamental English course in their first year.

- The organizers of the remedial course can continue to use NUSET as a pre and a post-test to measure students' English proficiency before and after the course.

- It would be ideal to find a convenient time slot and an appropriate venue for the course in order to maximize the learning outcomes of the course.

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