

Learning Objective Writing in English Teaching: Current Insights and Challenges for EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Even though some recent concern has arisen about the significance attached to learning objective writing in planning an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) lesson, most EFL teachers and teacher educators at present are convinced to believe that clear, well-delivered objectives are at the heart of any quality lesson. Without well-designed learning objectives, teachers and students may not be able to grasp what they want to achieve and, whether or not, they have achieved it. Using semi-structure interviews, this research is to explore a group of Thai EFL teachers' insights into what they see learning objectives today are and what makes it challenging to derive ones that are practical and professional in recent times. What is needed from the finding is some standard for writing effective learning objectives that would be applicable to all levels of EFL learning. EFL teachers are, as a result, encouraged to draw more attention to develop clear learning objectives that are in line with assessment and classroom practices.

Keywords: EFL Context, Learning Objectives, Lesson Planning, Thai EFL Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Learning objectives are statements that are normally presented to students before a learning session and indicate the competence or education that students should have by the end of the learning session. How learning objectives can benefit learning is supported by many educators over the past years. They can guide teaching and learning, direct student attention to core information, assist autonomous learning practices, and level up student engagement and assertion in content of the course (Osueke et al., 2018; Reynolds and Kearns, 2017).

Based on the existing literature, in a large perspective, EFL experts appear to define the term 'objectives' in a different way. Also, the way the term is defined is normally contradictory. When examining related studies in order to enumerate the quality of what makes good objectives, it has been found that the terms, 'aims', 'goals', 'objectives', and 'learning outcomes' are all referred to, so as to define the purpose of a syllabus. Nevertheless, these terms are explained in different ways. Richards (2001) uses the terms 'aim' and 'goal' interchangeably to indicate a change a program seeks to make as part of a curriculum set of ideas or principles. According to Richards (2001), objectives are described as the learning outcomes and the objectives should be consistent with the curriculum aim. On the other hand, Harmer (2007), defines aims as the outcomes which are intended to achieve. The aims should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed. Based on Harmer (2007), aims in fact help the overall objectives. Taking another point of view, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) divide objectives into three groups, which are global objectives, educational objectives and instructional objectives. Global objectives overall provide the vision and mission while educational objectives are for designing a curriculum. Last but not least, instructional objectives are meant to prepare lesson plans concerned.

The study is set out with two main research questions:

1. What are the views of a group of Thai EFL teachers of writing learning objectives in EFL context?
2. What makes writing EFL learning objectives practical and professional at present?

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing learning objectives can be a very challenging task for EFL teachers due to several reasons. When it comes to clarity and precision, learning objectives have to be lucid and specific, which requires a thorough understanding of what learners should achieve. Unclear or broad objectives often lead to confusion because once teachers are confused, they bring about ineffective teaching strategies affecting the way learning is undertaken. Also, objectives must be measurable so that advancement can be assessed. Crafting objectives that can be quantitatively or qualitatively gauged often requires careful consideration about how learning outcomes will be evaluated. According to Rodriguez and Albano (2017), effective learning outcomes clearly communicate what students should know and be able to do and are written to be behavioral, measurable, and attainable. It is crucial that each learning outcome is written with enough information to ensure that other teachers can use it to measure a learner's success and arrive at the same understandings. Synchronizing learning outcomes with assessments and pedagogy is the core of backward course design (Fink, 2003).

Moreover, it is important that learning objectives be in line with curriculum standards, institutional goals, and commendable practices. With reference to Mager (1997), in relation to depth of knowledge, to make learning outcomes deep and proper, determining the appropriate level of cognitive demand for objectives (e.g., recall vs. application vs. analysis) requires an understanding of Bloom's Taxonomy or other educational frameworks. Over the years, Bloom's Taxonomy has been used as a tool for EFL teachers to promote higher-order thinking skills among EFL students. When applied in the context of teaching English, it is claimed that it can enhance language proficiency and critical thinking abilities (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). With Bloom's Taxonomy as a framework, assessment items and course activities can then be aligned with learning objectives, classified into six levels, each indicating a different cognitive skill.

Writing Bloom Taxonomy Higher Order Thinking Skills are the top three levels of the cognitive domain in Bloom's Taxonomy. Historically, in 1956, Benjamin Bloom devised a classification system of thinking skills known as Bloom's Taxonomy. It is classified into six classes namely, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). Then, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) updated the old version so called Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (RBT) and ordered the cognitive process from the level of remembering to the higher level, which is a creative and critical thinking process (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In RBT, the categories are converted into active verbs and the order is reformed. This includes 'remember', 'understand', 'apply', 'analyze', 'evaluate', and 'create'. The instructional goals can be derived from these categories. One way a teacher can equip the students to attain them is using behavioral objectives. Behavioral objectives describe what the student will be able to do after having attended an activity, something that is observable and measurable. Each objective should thus begin with a verb that describes an observable behavior, such as describe, summarize, demonstrate, compare, develop, measure, modify, etc. The student can practically be observed and how well the objective was met would be monitored. Behavioral objectives do not carry verbs that describe feelings, emotions, or thoughts, which are not behavioral as they are not observable or measurable. Verbs in this category encompass 'believe, know, learn, realize, think, understand" which have to be avoided. In addition, what the student intends to do during the activity is his/ her goal, not learning objectives. Objectives are to be written from the perspective of what the student will be able to do after engaging in the activity (Young, 2009).

Writing effective objectives is an ongoing process that involves feedback and improvement as well, making it a skill that often improves with practice and experience. By utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy in EFL lessons, a deeper understanding of the language can be fostered, and critical thinking promoted. However, it is considered essential to provide scaffolding and support to students to ensure their success at each level. For an EFL teacher, adapting teaching strategies and materials to meet the diverse needs of students is strongly advisable.

Research Design

The study's primary aim was to explore the views of a group of twelve Thai EFL secondary school teachers of writing learning objectives in EFL context in Thailand and to what extent writing EFL learning objectives can be practical and professional for teaching EFL courses at school and even university level. In this study, following Richards (2001) and Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), to make it clear, the term 'objective' is used to

refer to the instructional outcomes of a lesson. With semi-structured interviews, it was possible to explore the interviewers' views completely as the interviewees were probed on their perceptions of learning objective writing as well as challenges they faced and their experiences in developing learning objectives for EFL courses. Each interview was conducted one on one and took about 20 minutes per round. It was conducted in Thai and voice recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The scripts were then translated into English and transcribed for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the interviews in writing learning objectives to identify learning objectives and any problematic aspects in relation to writing them, it was found that most of the interviewers see learning objectives as an important part of teaching and learning and that learning objectives must be written and clarified before any class. According to Reynolds and Kearns (2017), teachers can use learning objectives to draw a focus on key concepts and skills that students need for their future success. By using class activities that enable students to practice and hone the abilities specified in learning objectives, it would help prioritize over lectures that aim to cover just the content of learning.

Regarding challenges the teachers faced in writing learning objectives, four recurring problems were reported. The first problem is that objectives were too general to be achieved in a lesson and/or were teacher-centered. For instance, "The teacher will help students be familiar with the reported speech" as opposed to "Students will be able to use time expressions in reported speech by rewriting an interview", in which case the latter is much improved. Another case in point is "The teacher will demonstrate how to use phrasal verbs" instead of writing "Students will be able to use phrasal verbs for communication in the workplace".

Another problem points to the confusion that the activities rather than the learning outcomes were written as objectives, for example, 'Students will be able to fill in the blanks with the given terms' as opposed to 'Students will be able to identify the target vocabulary items by matching the words with their definition' in which it is much improved. More than half of the interviewees addressed this issue with quite similar comments once sample learning objectives were pointed out.

It was also found that many interviewees reported that the objectives were not easy to observe as they did not specify the condition and/ or the degree, for example, 'Students will be able to pronounce the /ch/ and /sh/ sounds' as opposed to 'Students will be able to pronounce the /ch/ and /sh/ sounds found in the news articles'.

Another interesting concern as reflected from more than half of the interviewees is that the teachers were often unable to write objectives for skills lessons, for example, "Students will have practiced reading for specific purpose", as opposed to 'Students will be able to identify the main ideas and organizations while reading texts on Business English'.

When asked about challenges in writing learning objectives and what should be done to make it professional and standardized, it was agreed that in order to help the teachers write more effective objectives, the criteria of objective writing were to be developed and instructed. This was also proposed by the researcher and the proposed criteria were shared with all the interviewees for their comments. The measures were intended to be straightforward and simple to apply, which consists of four stages. First, it is important to determine the focus of the lesson. Then, it is time to identify a particular outcome. Afterwards, it concerns identifying the activity to be used to reach the outcome. Finally, the objective is to be written using the concept of when, who, what and how. After the stages were reviewed, most interviewees concurred that with the code, it would make writing objectives more formal and systematic. However, some of the interviewees pointed out this code should not be taken rigidly as it should be used as a guideline rather than a protocol for objective writing given the nature of EFL learning/teaching that varies from class to class.

It is important that when teachers develop effective learning objectives in line with classroom learning and course evaluation, they actually set up clear goals for students to achieve (Mager, 1997). In addition, to identify a particular outcome, a statement that communicates the purpose of instruction using an action verb and

describes the expected performance and conditions under which the performance should occur has to be considered. (Simon and Taylor, 2009).

With the concept of when, who, what and how in mind in the final stage of objective writing as agreed in the findings, Crowe et. al. (2008) warned that the learning objectives should not include the instructional method intended to accomplish the objectives nor should they be written directly to serve as assessment tasks.

CONCLUSION

Currently, it would be unrealistic to say that EFL teachers no longer have any problems in terms of objective writing for lesson planning. In real life, EFL teachers and teacher educators still come across learning objectives that are too broad, too particular or even unfocused. However, from the findings, it can be said that the formulaic nature of the code has made it easier to communicate and share feedback about the quality of the objectives provided. Concurrently, learning outcomes are best seen from the integrated perspective considering how important learning objectives are in integrated course design. EFL teachers are thus urged to focus more on creating or crafting well-defined, well-written learning objectives that are aligned with assessment and classroom practice, student evaluation and learning outcomes. In addition, EFL teacher skill in writing learning objectives can be improved and enriched with mutual professional development endeavors.

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