

## STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ON SOCIAL, ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

English education in Thailand is still developing with its world academic ranking often found at low level. Local academics blamed the nationwide system that is focusing on grammar and tutoring style to help students simply 'pass' the exam, not communicative skills as it should be. There is a call for teachers to communicate in English with students inside and outside classroom as much as possible. This research aimed to understand students' perceptions towards the use of English on social, academic and professional context. A set of questionnaires was tested with 81 third-year Business English students, Phranakhon Rajabhat University. Five teachers and 10 students were interviewed. The findings: students' perception towards the use of English on social context is at *High* level ( $\bar{X} = 3.70$ ), while on academic context is also at *High* level ( $\bar{X} = 3.81$ ). Their perception towards the use of English on professional context is at *High* level ( $\bar{X} = 3.71$ ). The respondents reflected a certain level of fear on grammatical use when communicating in English on both social and academic context. In order to succeed in upgrading students' English ability, the three functions - teachers, students and the university, must take their parts more seriously.

**Keywords:** Perception, English, Social, Academic and Professional Context

## Introduction

English is never the language for most Thais despite the fact that the country received over 30 million international tourists from all over the world each year. English teaching and learning in the country are always cited as weak, inefficient and do not match the practicality of the real life. Local teachers are blamed the most for lacking effective teaching methodology and being unable to transfer the language knowledge and skills to their students. Most Thai teachers also do not use English to communicate with students both inside and outside the classroom, hence, making students lack opportunity to practice the language.

Many local academics blamed the education system in the country that it aims to help students simply 'pass the exam'. Students study the language in order to take the paper tests. English teaching in the country mainly focuses on sentence patterns, vocabulary and grammar, not the practical use in communication. After studying English for many years, students still cannot communicate. The emphasis on grammar and vocabulary will make students worry when they need to talk in real life (Krisanajinda, 2012).

Besides, the workloads of the local teachers are overwhelming. They need to

perform a lot of paper works regarding school evaluation, teacher evaluation, quality assurance, school activities, community service, religious functions, and many more. These overwhelmed responsibilities made them have limited time and opportunity for professional training and teaching preparation. The country is still facing the problem of teacher shortage, so the current ones bear the heavy teaching load. Secondary school teachers, for example, have to teach by average 29.5 hours per week, compared to the ideal workload of 18 hours (Atagi, 2011)

Despite the urge for the teachers to practice more communication with students, there are more factors cited by academics as a hindrance to support them doing their job.

Thailand's Education Act stipulated that the language teaching should emphasize on communicative language teaching. However, teachers are familiar with 'grammar translation' technique, focusing on making students 'pass the tests'. The teaching inside the classroom is like a tutoring course. There's no focus on language practice, but the memorizing for the examination (Bhuripanyawanich, 2018).

Students' perception towards the language learning is also misleading.

Many students and parents think learning English with native speakers is the only way to advance their language ability. Native speakers, accounted only around 400 million from 18 countries such as UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, are minority compared to 7.2 billion world population. It is estimated that 1.5 billion people can communicate in English nowadays (Anoop, 2017). There is little chance for a Thai student to meet English native speakers.

It's time for English teachers to focus on 'social English' which is the general conversation in everyday life. This will encourage students to express themselves more. Nowadays, teachers emphasize 'academic English' which is the study for the test. So, students feel that English is difficult and not interesting. Teachers should find strategies to help enhance vocabulary and pronunciation, using simple sentences. Teachers should not rush the lessons to deep grammar. Most Thai teachers focus on difficult lessons as they fear that their students will fail the exam (Wright, 2016). Samkoses (2015) explained that there are 5 factors making English learning in Thailand unimproved: 1) Teachers are not efficient. 2) The hours of language learning are inadequate. 3) The wrong attitude that English is far from their life. 4) Thai students

love to find faults on others' language use. 5) Teaching methodology is not appropriate for Thai students. Teachers should regularly and continuously talk to their students in English everyday so English usage will not be seen as alien practice.

While academics are endlessly arguing about the English study in the country, many standardized tests revealed negative results. The ONET (Ordinary National Educational Test) result of 2018, where 704,692 Grade 6 students took, showed that the average score of English subject is 36.34 out of 100 (Samarjarn, 2018). ONET of Grade 9, where 643,592 students participated, showed the average score of English at 30.45. ONET of Grade 12, where 372,587 students did the test resulted in the average score of English subject of only 28.31. (Daily News, 31 Mar 2018)

Education First (2018) ranked Thailand for its English usage level in 64<sup>th</sup> out of 88 countries that do not use English as native language. Among the tops are Sweden in 1<sup>st</sup>, Netherlands 2<sup>nd</sup>, and Singapore 3<sup>rd</sup>. TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) in 2017 revealed the scores for Thailand as among the lowest group, gaining 482 out of 990 in listening and reading skills (ETS, 2018).

The above examples indicated that English teaching and learning in Thailand is

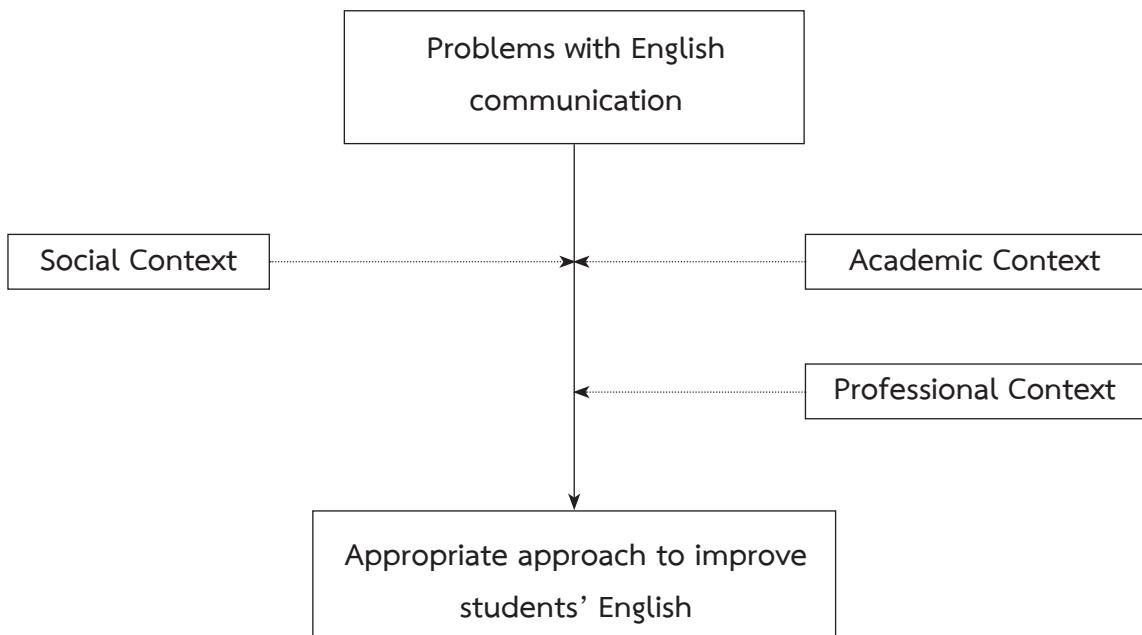
still inadequate and there is a need to study the causes and possible solutions to the problem. While academics pointed that the language teachers should use English with students inside and outside the classroom, the researcher wanted to study students' perceptions towards the use of social and academic English. The result will help us understand the psyche of learners clearer and how they perceive the natural use of the language.

### Research Objectives

1. study students' perceptions towards the use of English in social, academic and professional context.
2. present the possible practice in order to help enhance students' English language ability.

### Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework is drawn as following:



### Methodology

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methods. A set of 5-Likert scale questionnaires was distributed to the students. Five English language teachers and 10 students were randomly selected for a semi-structured interview. The obtained data was analyzed using basic statistics of frequency, percentage and standard deviation. Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

### Research Scope

Data collection and analysis were conducted during April - November 2019. Participants for this study are 81 third-

year students of Business English Program, Phranakhon Rajabhat University. All of them are Thai. The research population was selected by purposive sampling, using 100% of the selected group. 15 teachers and students were interviewed.

### Research Results

Among 81 respondents, 15 of them (18.5%) are male, 66 are female (81.5%). This group is the third-year Business English majors. When looking at other years of the same program, there are proportionally more female than male students in all classes.

**Table 1** How much do you like your program?

Level	Number (n = 81)	Percentage
Very high	12	14.8
High	43	53.1
Neutral	25	30.9
Low	1	1.2
Very low	-	-

The simple question like this (Table 1) looks normal; however, if we look at the answer clearly, the result is worth looking into details. Most students (67.9%) rated their preference to the Business English program at *High-Very High* level which is satisfying. About 31% rated at *Neutral* level and it probably means that they do not like what they are studying much. One student (1.2%) rated his or her preference to the program at

*Low* level despite the fact that he/she has been studying in this program for 3 years.

When asked to evaluate their level of English language, here is the result (Table 2). While around 23% of them rated themselves at *Good-Very Good* level, 67.9% humbly gave themselves at *Fair* level. Seven respondents (8.7%) rated themselves at *Low-Very Low* level, reflecting that they are not satisfied with their English level.

**Table 2** Self-rated Level of English

Level	Number (n = 81)	Percentage
Very good	5	6.2
Good	14	17.3
Fair	55	67.9
Low	5	6.2
Very low	2	2.5

**Table 3** Anticipating the Use of English in the Future

Level	Number (n = 81)	Percentage
Very high	55	67.9
High	16	19.8
Neutral	7	8.6
Low	-	-
Very low	3	3.7

When asked, “How much do you think English language will be useful for your future job?” the answer is not out of expectation. Most of them see the value of studying the language that it will be useful for their future career. A small portion, 8.6% of the respondents see it at *Neutral* level. Three of them, 3.7%, showed negative answer to such question and do not believe it will be useful for their future.

When asked “Who made the decision for you to study in Business English Program?” the answer is quite interesting. Almost 20% of them said their parents did the decision. This reflected the local culture of Thailand that obedience to your parents is deemed high and sacred. Around 10% said it is their friends who persuaded them to come here. Five of them come because of the marketing team of the university.

**Table 4** Who made the decision for you to study in Business English Program?

Items	Number (n = 81)	Percentage
Parents	16	19.8
Friends	8	9.9
Marketing team of the university	4	4.9
High school teachers	-	-
Myself	53	65.4

It is satisfying to see that 65.4% of them made decision by themselves. Altogether, it is easily seen that around 35% of the respondents have someone else made decision for them to study in this program, not themselves.

with English language. However, we cannot assume that the group spending less time in studying the language has less proficiency than those who spend more time with it.

The questionnaires about students' perception towards the use of English

**Table 5** Time Spending with English per Day

Hours	Number (n = 81)	Percentage
0-3	19	23.5
4-6	37	45.7
7-9	14	17.3
10-12	4	4.9
12+	7	8.6

The time spending on English language each day can indicate students' seriousness in studying the language. 23.5% spend less than 3 hours a day. Most of the respondents claimed that they spend 4-6 hours each day practicing English. This might be the combination of the class time and self-study after class. Around 13% of the students spend more than 10 hours a day

comprised of 15 statements, grouping as in social context, academic context, and professional context. The students were asked to rate their opinion in the five class-interval scales of *Agree Strongly* (4.21-5.00), *Agree* (3.41-4.20), *Neutral* (2.61-3.40), *Disagree* (1.81-2.60), and *Disagree Strongly* (1.00-1.80) (Ruangprapan, 1996)

Table 6 Perception towards the Use of English on Social Context

Items	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Level
1 I want my English teachers to talk to me in English outside classroom.	3.72	.74	High
2 I appreciate the teachers who use English outside classroom.	3.56	.72	High
3 I feel more comfortable when teachers communicate with me in English outside classroom.	3.81	.65	High
4 I am not worried about grammar talking to teachers outside classroom.	3.40	.80	Neutral
5 I know that using English outside classroom will help me improve my language skills.	4.02	.68	High
Average		3.70	.71
			High

Students want their English teachers to talk to them in English outside the classroom ( $\bar{X} = 3.72$ ), at *High* level. They also appreciate the teachers who speak to them in English ( $\bar{X} = 3.56$ ). The fourth statement is interesting. Most of the respondents said they were not worried about grammar when talking to the teachers outside the classroom, yet they still gave it the lowest scores ( $\bar{X} = 3.40$ ) compared to other statements. This is the confirmation to many studies about Thai education on English

that teachers mainly focus their lessons on grammar, rather than communication practice. It underlined the fact that many students fear of making grammatical errors when they communicate in English. This finding is in line with the study by Khamprated (2012, pp. 68-69) which stated that students don't speak English because of the fear of making grammatical errors. Many of them had bad experience with grammar-focused language teachers.

Table 7 Perception towards the Use of English on Academic Context

Items	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Level
6 I want my English teachers to explain the lessons in English in classroom.	3.59	.91	High
7 I appreciate the teachers who use English in classroom.	4.00	.70	High
8 I feel more comfortable when teachers communicate with me in English inside classroom.	3.69	.73	High
9 I am not worried about grammar talking in English in class.	3.62	.76	High
10 I know that using English in class will help me improve my language skills.	4.18	.67	High
Average	3.81	.75	High

Academic English in this context refers to the use of the language inside the classroom where teachers explain the lessons in English all or most of the time. The sixth statement received the lowest score ( $\bar{X} = 3.59$ ) compared to others. It may be interpreted that not all of the respondents want their teachers to use English in the classroom. This is in line with the result from the interview of 10 students among this same population that they want the teachers to use both Thai and English in the classroom as they are afraid that they might not understand all

the lessons thoroughly. Many suggested that the teachers explained all the lessons in English and sum up in Thai language.

The ninth statement, saying that they do not worry about grammar when they speak English ( $\bar{X} = 3.62$ ), reflected that many of them are still worried about grammar. This is similar to the study by Yamalee (2018, p.19) which confirmed that students are overwhelmed with fear that they might not be able to use English as native speakers, so they stop talking all together.

Table 8 Perception towards the Use of English on Professional Context

Items	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Level
11 I am confident that my English ability will help me get a good job after graduation.	3.65	.67	High
12 I see that the program has prepared me so well on English ability for my future job.	3.50	.69	High
13 I am now practicing English regularly to prepare myself for the future job.	3.49	.61	High
14 I know very well that English will be used for the job interview, paper test and working.	3.95	.72	High
15 I know that my English ability will make me get higher income.	3.96	.66	High
Average	3.71	.67	High

All statements in Table 8 were designed to gauge students' perception of English usage in their job after graduation. Most of the respondents are confident that their English ability will help them get a good job after graduation ( $\bar{X} = 3.65$ ), at *High* level. They know that the program has prepared them well on the language ability for their future job ( $\bar{X} = 3.50$ ), also at *High* level. When asked if they are practicing English regularly, most of them ( $\bar{X} = 3.49$ ) said they do. However, this statement received the lowest scores compared to

others in the same table. It is in contrast to statement fourteenth which asked if they know that English will be used for the job interview, paper test and work. It received the much higher score ( $\bar{X} = 3.95$ ). The question left unanswered is why they do not practice English regularly despite knowing quite well that the language will be used for the job hunting. Some interviewed students suggested that laziness is the main reason barring them from regular practice on the language, despite knowing full well the value of English for their future career.

Table 9 The Three Perceptions

Items	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
Perception on social context	3.70	.71
Perception on academic context	3.81	.75
Perception on professional context	3.71	.67

The overall result of Table 9 showed that the respondents pay much interest in the language practice inside the classroom. This puzzled the researcher because there is an expectation that students would feel more relaxed communicating in English with teachers outside the classroom, in general social context. When asking for the reasons from this finding with the interviewed students, they said many students still feel that speaking English is still '*a burden, something alien, something unpleasant*' to the feeling. So, even outside the classroom where there is no official evaluation for marking, students feel that there's no need to use English. This mindset needs to be studied thoroughly and hopefully will change if we want to upgrade students' English competency. This is in line with the study by Yan (2005) which found that the language learners may develop a decrease in self-esteem if they are overly concerned about what other students think of them

when speaking English. Teachers can also play a crucial role in students' behavior. If the teachers are dictatorial, authoritarian and intimidating, students will experience anxiety and choose not to speak.

### Interview Results

Five English language teachers and 10 students of Business English Program (BE) were randomly selected for semi-structured interview. The questions are: 1) Why Business English students are reluctant to communicate in English with teachers? 2) What should the teachers and students do to help build English-speaking environment?

The finding is interesting, ranging from the overall management of the program to the inner motivation in individual student.

**Teachers:** Most English teachers look at the program management level, covering the budget to support the program and the possible role of teachers to help enhance students' English proficiency. Among 130 credits of Business English

Program, 30 of them are dedicated to General Education courses – all of them are taught in Thai language. It is seen that it has made Business English students lose the opportunity to develop English language skills. If possible, some of General Education courses should be taught in English, or some of these subjects were transferred to be under Business English program instead, so the program can design more English-related courses for students. This will give more time for Business English students to practice English.

An interviewed teacher suggested that the university should help support facilities to accommodate English-speaking environment in the campus, for example, mock-up hotel room, coffee shop, restaurant, etc. where Business English students are trained to use English at all time on those premises. More budgets shall be given for the program to conduct English-promoting activities such as English Camp, English Club, English-language newspaper, etc. The program is now being run with limited resources, hence students have limited chance of practicing the language.

All interviewed teachers said most BE students have poor academic background since the first day they enrolled into the program. There is almost no screening process to select the wanted students.

Both interviewed teachers and students unanimously agreed that self-motivation is mostly not there.

Some interviewed teachers also said they are willing to use English with students outside the classroom but there is a limit that is worth considering. Most BE students have limited language capacity so it is difficult to communicate with them when the teachers have limited time for work. All the teachers are normally overwhelmed with a lot of paper work so they seem on the rush all the time. The teachers do not have much time talking to students outside class. The conversation even in Thai language with students is normally very short and direct. It needs to be in Thai in order to avoid misunderstanding. Most of the conversation with students is the instruction for students to doing academic tasks properly, not on general context. In summary, the academic circumstances at the program premises are not conducive for language practicing.

*Students:* Although some of the students' ideas are not different from the teachers as cited above, some ideas are unique and worth looking into. Almost all interviewed students said the current batch of teachers at BE program can easily help students advance in English, should they speak English with students all or most of the time. It is not regularly practiced right

now. Speaking English in social context outside class is still a barrier at the present. Teachers need to break this wall and make it happen so the students will get the benefit from this practice. One interviewed student said “It is more practical to practice English in the campus than do it in the job interview room in front of your prospective boss.”

While the program might have limited resources, there are still a lot of opportunities for helping students. The interviewed students suggested we should maximize the use of the internet on top of classroom lessons. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and Line which are daily used by Business English teachers and students should use only English as a medium of communication. Students said they preferred the teachers who regularly use English with students on these channels. Several students said they are practicing English speaking with foreign friends through some online applications such as HelloTalk and now they have more confidence in speaking English. Furthermore, self-motivation can be obtained through online communication as well if students see good example on the internet. Successful alumni from Business English program are a good tool to encourage current students to study English harder. For example, a short VDO clip of

themselves talking about their success uploaded into the program’s Facebook page or website can be a powerful source of encouragement for the weak students. To encourage students to pay more attention to the lessons, students suggested the teachers should utilize more activities inside and outside class as much as possible. Lectures alone are boring and will not entice weak students to pay more attention in the language learning.

While a small portion of students are busy self-studying to advance their language skills, many still do not spend their time with English. A student said *“Most of my friends in class are just waiting for spoon-feeding from teachers. They lack self-motivation.”* The interviewed students said the teachers need to find some mechanism to help these low-motivated groups to have clearer goal in life. A sense of purpose and a sense of seriousness in studying the language are not yet there.

Both interviewed teachers and students agreed that the teachers should not focus on grammar when communicating in English with students. Teachers should not correct students’ grammar while talking to them. Students are normally overwhelmed with fear of making grammatical errors so they choose to be silent instead. Thai people care much about the ‘face’ and

they are afraid of losing face in front of others. They do not want to be seen as weak or inefficient. Teachers can change this mindset easily by focusing on the content, not the grammar.

### Discussion

To know students' perceptions towards the use of English on social, academic and professional context, there is a need to study their self motivation since the first day they enrolled into the Business English program. Around 35% of BE students declared that they have someone else choose the program for them to study, not themselves. They did not exercise their free choice since the beginning, reflecting a strong local culture that needs further study. Over 30% of the respondents said they like the program at *Neutral-Low* level (Table 1). This revelation may reflect their self-motivation in pursuing the language study.

Table 2 showed that almost 10% of students rated their language level at *Low-Very Low* level. Table 3 showed that around 4% expected the use of English after graduation at *Very Low* level. Yet, they are still studying in Business English program. These low scores can be interpreted that many students have low motivation and performance in studying the language. Some interviewed students

confirmed the same result that they have low motivation to study and do not believe they can achieve anything in studying. They looked at themselves as the ones with poor educational and socio-economical background in life. The study by Schunk (1995) reassured this finding that low motivation and performance can be a result of low self-efficacy which students look at themselves as incapable. It is therefore a duty of teachers to find ways to help this group with low motivation to see the value of English language.

Their perceptions towards the language use on the three contexts are all at *High* level – social context ( $\bar{X} = 3.70$ ), academic context ( $\bar{X} = 3.81$ ) and professional context ( $\bar{X} = 3.71$ ). This reflected that most students prefer teachers to use English with them as much as possible. This is in line with the result of the interview which showed that students want teachers to use English more inside and outside classrooms.

The interviewed teachers see the overall picture of the management that it is not conducive for students' language development. The change in curriculum structure was suggested, for example, reducing the General Education courses and emphasizing on English communication subjects so students will spend more time with the language. Moreover, the university

should help build up facilities that can help students having more opportunity to practice English. This is similar to the study by Saad (2015) which found that the lack of chance to read and speak English will hamper the language learning. Even signs, posters, news in English language can help students a lot.

The interviewed students still see that the teachers are the valuable asset that can help improve their language skills. They suggested teachers should use English most of the time inside and outside classroom, including the social media platforms where they use to communicate with students. English used by teachers is not practiced as demanded by students yet. Students also

suggested that grammatical errors should not be focused much by teachers as they do not want to ‘lose face’ in front of their friends when the teachers corrected them in front of others. This is in line with a study by Li Ping (2004) which found that teachers need to create a humanistic, relaxing and motivating atmosphere for English learning. Negative attitudes like a lack of motivation or self-confidence and anxiety act as a filter preventing students from success in language learning. However, some students who have self-motivation can find tools and applications online to practice their English in their free time. These few students can still enhance their language level despite having limited resources surrounding them.

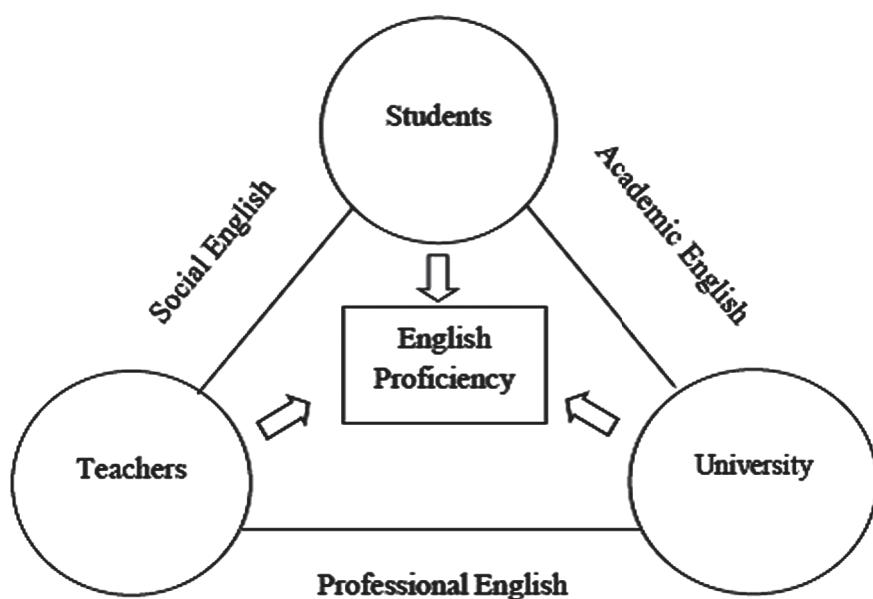


Figure 1: Tri-party Co-ordination

The overall approach to help improve students' language proficiency can be summarized in the graphic above.

There is the need for the three functions – teachers, students, and the university, to help increase the BE students' language proficiency. It might be true that one function alone can make so much change on the language capability. For example, if one student has strong desire from his inner heart to improve his English and spends so much time each day to self-study on whatever he can grab at hand, we might see his improvement in a short period of time, even with little help from the teacher and the university. But that self-motivated student would be a rare case most schools. The truth is that most of BE students are still struggling to improve their English level and they also have expectation from the teachers and the university to help them have better skills and eventually get a

better job. That is why it is a must for these three functions to fully play their part and take responsibility in helping students.

The study aimed to comprehend Business English students' perceptions towards the English use on social, academic, and professional context. It was found that a number of students have someone else choose the program for them since the first enrollment. Many of them lack motivation and are overwhelmed with anxiety in communicating with the teachers. Even though all students' perceptions towards the use of English on social, academic and professional context are at *High* level, some interviewed teachers and students gave meaningful advice to improve the management of the program. Three aspects – teachers, students, and the university, are playing a crucial role in helping improve the language ability of students, if they act with sincerity on their parts.

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