A content analysis of Thai master's theses in ELT from 2003 to 2011

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Abstract

Exploring current research interests are of researchers' interest in various disciplines as it provides understanding of how the fields progress. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), especially in Thailand, such exploration seems to receive little attention. This study aims to study the current interests of research topics and research methods of Thai master's theses in ELT from 2003 to 2011. This study analyzes194 theses produced by graduates from seven Thai universities by using content analysis. The coding framework consists of six categories which are 1) research focus 2) educational levels of research context 3) type of research design 4) data source 5) type of research instrument, and 6) type of analytical method. The findings reveal that most ELT master's theses have a main research focus on student performance (60.82%), especially in an undergraduate level (25.64%). Most theses employ a human quantitative research design (61.34%) by using students as a major of data source (80.41%). The instruments used most are a combination of a questionnaire and a test and the analytical methods mostly used are descriptive and inferential statistics.

1. Introduction

Researchers in applied linguistics in several countries such as Bani-Khaled (2012) in Jordan, Kirmizi (2012) in Turkey, and Lin and Cheng (2010) in Taiwan have attempted to explore research trends and progresses in the field by studying dissertations and theses. In the field of applied linguistics in Thailand, it seems that we have limited understanding about the current trends and how it progresses. This study aims to study the trend of Thai master's theses in ELT by addressing a research question: what are the current interests of research topics and research methods of Thai master's theses in ELT from 2003 to 2011.As a main proportion of research studies in ELT in Thailand were derived from master's theses (Intaraprawat & Usaha, 2001), this will help us understand more about the trend in research topics and methods in applied linguistics in Thailand

1.1 Value of examining research trend

Studies that have looked at research trends can be found in several disciplines such as communication (Zhang, 2005), E learning (Alias, SaedahSiraj, Abdul Rahman, Ujang, Gelamdin, & Said, 2013), and science education (Chang Yueh-Hsia, Chang Chun-Yen & Tseng, 2010). One main reason for exploring the research trends suggested in these studies is that it is important that an academic discipline periodically looks at its status for the purpose of learning where it has been, where it is currently, and where it tends to be in the future, the idea promoted by Brown(1969).

Sharing the same idea with Brown (1969), several applied linguists (e.g. Bani-Khaled, 2012; Jaroongkhongdach, Watson Todd, Keyuravong, &Hall, 2012; Kirmizi, 2012; Lazaraton, 2000; Lin & Cheng, 2010; Richards, 2009) have attempted to shed light on the research trends in the field of applied linguistics. For example, Lin and Cheng (2010), using content analysis method, examined the research trends in master's programs in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in Taiwan. They looked at493 master's theses produced between 2003 and 2007 with a focus on research contexts and research topics. Another study conducted by Bani-Khaled (2012) employed a meta-analysis to examine

the title of English language theses and dissertations in Jordan in order to identify the key areas in research interests and to highlight the distribution of the topics studied with a 40-year timeframe. Kirmizi (2012) investigated the research trend in master's theses in ELT from 2006 to 2011 in Turkey by specifically looking at the research topics of the theses.

From the review of these previous three studies, two interesting points emerge. Firstly, although investigating both research topics and methods are regarded as an important way to gain the overview understanding of how one's field progresses, these studies seem to focus only on research topics, and overlooked research methods. In this study, however, we will look both at research topics and methods as, we believe, both can provide us with a more rounded picture of the research trend. Secondly, among these three studies, Lin and Cheng's (2010) work is interesting in that it focuses on both the educational levels of research context and research topics. Lin and Cheng's (2010) study provides us with the insight into the trend of English educational issue in one's own local context. Thus, in this context, we will also look at the educational levels in research context.

2. Research purpose

Given that it is useful to explore past research interests through master's theses, and that we have limited understanding about the current research interests in ELT in Thailand, this study aims to study the trend of Thai master's theses in ELT by addressing a research question: what are the current interests of research topics and research methods of Thai master's theses in ELT from 2003 to 2011.

3. Methodology

To explore the research trend in terms of topics and methods through a large number of ELT theses, we used a content analysis which is "a systematic procedure that categorizes, quantifies texts, and makes inferences from such texts" (Jaroongkhongdach, 2011, p.55). This definition is useful in that it provides us with steps in conducting a content analysis.

The term systematic procedure means the planning of operational procedures which starts with categorizing. Categorizing can be considered as a way to sort things out. In categorizing, we need to have a category and codes (see Appendix).Once categorized, data is quantified. This characteristic helps content analysts to change information that is difficult to count (e.g. an idea) to numeric value, which is then suitable to cope with large volumes of data (Krippendorff, 2004). These numeric values then are bases for making inferences. In using content analysis, researchers can make inferences about the text author, the text itself, and the text reader.

3.1 Thesis collection

This study collected master's theses from selected seven major universities that offer ELT (but maybe under different names such as Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL)) programs in Thailand produced between 2003 and 2011. These universities are Chiang Mai University (CMU), Chulalongkorn University (CU), Kasetsart University (KU), Khon Kean University (KKU), King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), Silpakorn University (SU), and Srinakharinwirot University (SWU). These theses were retrieved from ThaiLis Digital Collection (http://thailis.or.th/tdc/), which is the online data-base collection of theses and dissertations from all universities in Thailand. Note that initially, we intended to collect theses to cover a 10 year period (from 2003 to 2012). However, at the time of data collection, there were only a few theses in 2012, perhaps due to the lag time in processing or digitalizing the theses. So we thought including the theses in 2012 would bias the data. We then decided to limit our data to from year 2003 to year 2011. We finally could be able to retrieve 194 master's theses.

3.2 Coding research topics and methods

In this study, we were interested in investigating research topics and research methods. Under the research topics, there are two categories: (1) Research focus and (2) Educational levels of research context. Under the research methods, there are four categories: (1) Type of research design (2) Data source (3) Type of research instrument, and (4) Type of analytical method. These categories were selected and adjusted from Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2011), and from Lin and Cheng (2010).

The method of coding is thematic, which Krippendorff (2004) suggests, depends upon on understanding of categories and responding information. All the theses were coded by the first researcher. These codes were checked for inter-reliability by having an experienced ELT code 15 theses (approximately 8% of the data). The inter-reliability score was 81.37% which was considered acceptable.

4. Findings

The purpose of this research is to explore the trends of current research topics and methods of master's theses in ELT in Thailand from selected seven major universities that offer ELT program.

Table 1 presents the overview of research topics examined by graduate students in ELT program from 2003 to 2011.

Table 1   Research topics (Research focus)

Research Topic (Research focus)	CU	CMU	KKU	KU	KMUTT	SU	SWU	**Total**
Student performance	10	31	19	6	12	10	30	118 (60.82%)
Student state	0	0	0	0	3	0	2	5(2.58%)
Teacher	2	0	0	0	12	0	0	14(7.22%)
Learning support	2	2	3	10	5	30	2	54(27.84%)
Language	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2(1.03%)
Others	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1(0.52%)
Total	14*	33*	23*	16*	34*	40*	34*	194(100%)

*The number of theses in individual universities (this is applicable to all the Tables in the findings)

From Table 1, we can see that there were common interests of research focus among universities as the largest proportion of the theses focuses on student performance (60.82%). Following is the learning support focus (27.84%), which was ranked the second most frequently studied. Teacher focus (7.22%) was the third in the rank. When we carefully looked at the data in Table 1, however, it was found that there were two groups of interests under research focus: interests in student performance which was mainly concerned with students' cognitive factors such as skill learning, skill testing, or learning strategy (i.e., CU, CMU, KKU, KMUTT, and SWU); and interests in learning support which it covers materials development, curriculum development, or test development (i.e., KU, SU).

Table 2   Research topics (Educational levels of research context)

Research Topic (Educational levels of research context)	CU	CMU	KKU	KU	KMUTT	SU	SWU	Total
Primary	1	8	6	0	0	6	12	33(21.15%)
Lower secondary	3	6	5	1	0	12	9	36(23.08%)
Higher secondary	0	11	3	1	0	14	3	32(20.51%)
Vocational certificate	0	2	1	0	0	3	3	9(5.77%)
Undergraduate	5	6	5	3	13	3	5	40(25.64%)
Graduate	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2(1.28%)
Others	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	4(2.56%)
Total	10	33	20	6	17	38	32	156(100%)

From Table 2, it is noticeable that all universities in this present study shared the same interests in educational level of research context in a way that they mostly conducted research in an undergraduate level. Under the educational level of research context category, we can see that the undergraduate level was the most frequently examined context (25.64%). The lower secondary level (23.08%) followed the first rank, with the primary level (21.15%) the third most examined context. However, when carefully examined, it was found that there were three groups of interests in educational level of research context among these seven major universities: interests in undergraduate level of research context (i.e., CU, KU, and KMUTT), interests in lower secondary level of research context (i.e., SU, SWU), interests equally in lower secondary and undergraduate level (i.e.,CMU, KKU).

Table 3   Research methods (Type of research design)

Research methods (Type of research design)	CU	CMU	KKU	KU	KMUTT	SU	SWU	Total
Human quantitative	3	33	13	4	1	35	30	119(61.34%)
Human qualitative	0	0	0	0	13	0	0	13(6.70%)
A combination of human quantitative and human qualitative	11	0	10	12	20	5	4	62(31.96%)
Text quantitative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Text qualitative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A combination of text quantitative and human qualitative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	14	33	23	16	34	40	34	194(100%)

Table 3 shows that, in general, the interests of research from seven major universities mainly employ a human quantitative research design. Under type of research design category, the human quantitative design was the most frequently employed by graduate students in the ELT programs (61.34%). This is followed with a combination of human quantitative and human qualitative which was ranked the second most employed research design (31.96%). Human qualitative design (6.70%) was raked the third most employed research design.

Table 4   Research methods (Data source)

Research methods (Data source)	CU	CMU	KKU	KU	KMUTT	SU	SWU	**Total**
Student	11	33	20	6	15	38	33	156(80.41%)
Teacher	1	0	0	1	15	1	1	19(9.79%)
People NOT in an educational institution	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2(1.03%)
Formal text	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Informal text	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A combination of any of the above	1	0	1	8	3	1	0	14(7.22%)
Others	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	3(1.55%)
Total	14	33	23	16	34	40	34	194(100%)

As shown in Table 4, overall the interests of research from seven major universities in regards to data source shared the same interests in a way that they used students as their main data source (80.41%). The remaining were all under 10.00%. Looking at the data in Table 4 more closely, we found two groups of interests in data source: interests in using students as the main data source (i.e., CU, CMU, KKU, KU, SU, and SWU), interests equally in using teacher and student as the main data source (KMUTT). What is also interesting is that none of the collected theses studied texts. This can perhaps point to the need to call for more attention to studying texts in ELT research in Thailand.

Table 5   Research methods (Type of research instrument)

Research Topic (Type of research instrument)	CU	CMU	KKU	KU	KMUTT	SU	SWU	**Total**
Questionnaire	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	4(2.05%)
Written report	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Verbal report	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1(0.52%)
Test	1	13	7	3	0	0	5	29(14.95%)
Written task(Individual)	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	3(1.55%)
Spoken task(Individual)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Interview	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	5(2.48%)
Observation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1(0.52%)
Written task(Interactive)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1(0.52%)
Spoken task(Interactive)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A combination of any of the above	9	18	16	11	19	40	29	142(73.20)
Others	0	2	0	0	5	0	0	7(3.61%)
Not applicable	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1(0.52%)
Total	14	33	23	16	34	40	34	194(100%)

Table 5 indicates that there were common interests in employing more than one research instrument among seven major universities as revealed in *a combination of any of the above* which accounts for 73.20%. While this finding is interesting, it is not clear about a combination of which instrument and which instrument. Therefore, a closer look at the data is needed. Having search through the original data, it was found that the majority of a combination is between a questionnaire and a test which is 64 (out of 142). This figure is much higher than other any types of combinations. This suggests that graduate students in ELT were mainly interested in using human quantitative research design, and thus they might decide to use a questionnaire and a test for their research for the reason that these two instruments can be helpful in collecting the quantifiable data.

Table 6   Research methods (Type of analytical method)

Research Topic (Type of analytical method)	CU	CMU	KKU	KU	KMUTT	SU	SWU	**Total**
Descriptive	0	31	8	4	1	1	0	45(23.20%)
Inferential	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3(1.55%)
Preset orientation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1(0.52%)
Emergent orientation	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	5(2.58%)
Narrative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A combination of any of the above	14	2	15	10	27	38	30	136(70.10%)
Others	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	4(2.06%)
Not applicable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cannot identify	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	14	33	23	16	34	40	34	194(100%)

Table 6 suggests that overall research conducted by graduate students from seven major universities mostly used a combination of analytical method (70.10%). A closer look at the data shows that 82 out of 136 is the use of descriptive and inferential statistics. Another interesting point is that there were few cases that employ non statistical methods for analysis. This suggests that most graduate students in ELT program in Thailand were probably interested in conducting quantitative research whereas qualitative research was paid little attention.

5. Discussion

The aim of this research is to explore the current interests of research topics and methods of master's theses in ELT produced between 2003 and 2011 in Thailand. The findings suggest that most of the ELT master's theses focus on student performance in an undergraduate level. These theses mostly used students as the main data source in a human quantitative research deign. It is then not surprising to learn that a combination of a questionnaire and a test was mostly employed in the theses and thus, a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics were mainly used as their main analytical method.

The findings show that the majority of ELT master's theses in Thailand put a focus on studying the student performance in an undergraduate level. One possible explanation is that the ELT curriculum in Thailand mainly focuses on students' cognitive factors such as skills learning, skills testing, or learning strategies as the most important issue. This is not unusual because studies into such issues might help students improve their English skills. With a closer look, the seven major universities can be categorized into two groups of interests: the universities that interested in investigating student performance which includes CU, CMU, KKU, KMUTT, and SWU; and the universities that were interested in investigating learning support which are KU and SU. This might be related to the research policies of individual universities/departments or the researchers'' expertise. For the analysis of research methods, the findings show that the highest interest of ELT master's theses was on the application of human quantitative research design and on the use of students as the main data source.

The findings that most ELT master's theses in Thailand focus on investigating the student performance were similar to those in Turkey (Kirmizi, 2012) and in Taiwan (Lin & Cheng, 2010). This is the nature of the discipline in helping students to be able to use English. However, while the majority of ELT master's theses in Thailand focuses on conducting research at the undergraduate level, the majority of ELT master's theses in Taiwan examines the secondary education at a high school level. The focus on undergraduate students does not mean that the master's students are working with these undergraduate students. In fact, it is likely that these master's students are working with lower levels of education such as a high school because in Thailand those who can teach at undergraduate students need to have a

master's degree. So, it might be that the ELT curriculum in KMUTT provides a teaching practicum course where the graduate students (regarded as novice teachers) will have a chance to practise teaching with undergraduate students from different majors in KMUTT, so they might find it suitable and convenient to exercise their teaching practice with their research.

For research methods, the main interest of ELT master's theses in employing human quantitative research design in Thailand was resembled to the findings from the study of Bani-Khaled (2012) in Jordan that a substantial portion of research used an empirical quantitative approach rather than a qualitative approach. This finding research in ELT in Thailand and Jordan share a similar interest in looking the students and also a similar conception of research.

Accordingly, it is possible that they used a combination of a questionnaire and a test, and a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics for analytical method, given the reason that using various types of research instrument can help them in reaching a more rounded and an in-depth data from the students.

We hope that the findings will help ELT academics as well as master's students in Thailand to see research studies that were mostly as well as rarely explored. The findings in this study may also point to the need for further research into different research areas in ELT such as students' texts or students' affective factors in learning English.

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Appendix

No.	Category and Code	
Coding framework for analyzing master's theses in English Language Teaching		
Research focus		
1	**Research focus** refers to the main concern of the current study.	
	(10)	Student-focus
	11	Student performance-focus – This is mainly concerned with students' cognitive factors e.g. skill learning, skill testing, or learning strategy.
	12	Student state-focus – This is mainly concerned with students' affective factors to learning e.g. motivation or perception.
	20	Teacher-focus – This is mainly concerned with teacher improvement in English language skills or professional skills e.g. teaching or researching.
	30	Learning support-focus – This is mainly concerned with materials development, curriculum development, or test development.
	40	Language-focus – This is mainly concerned with language patterns e.g. corpus analysis or textual analysis.
	70	Others (Please specify.)
	Note: To code this category, refer to the title, the abstract, the keywords (if any).	
2	**Educational levels of research context** refer to the educational levels of students in the research context.	
	10	Primary
	(20)	Secondary
	21	Lower secondary
	22	Higher secondary
	30	Vocational certificate
	(40)	University
	41	Undergraduate
	42	Graduate
	70	Others (Please specify.)
Research method		
3	**Type of research design** refers to the research design that guides the current study.	
	(10)	Human - This focuses on investigating human aspects such as human behavior/ cognition.
	11	Human quantitative design - This refers to a study that uses humans as main source of data, uses *numerical values* as main data, and uses a *statistical method* as main analysis.
	12	Human qualitative design - This refers to a study that uses humans as main source of data and uses *non-numerical values* as main data, and uses a *non-statistical method* as main analysis.
	13	A combination of Code 11 and Code 12
	(20)	Text - This focuses on investigating linguistic features such as stylistics.
	21	Text quantitative design - This refers to a study that uses text as main source of data and *turns it into numerical values*, and uses a *statistical method* as main analysis.
	22	Text qualitative design - This refers to a study that uses text as main source of data and uses a *non-statistical method* as main analysis.
	23	A combination of Code 21 and Code 22
	70	Others (Please specify.)
	Note: 1. In some research, you may see a statement explicitly suggesting what the main/primary data or analysis is. However, if there is no such indication, consider the descriptions of data and analysis. 2. **ONLY** select code 13 or code 23 when you think the quantitative and qualitative aspects are given an equal importance in the research design.	

No.	Category and Code	
	Research method	
4	**Data source** refers to the source of the data collected for the current study.	
	(10)	Human
	11	Student
	12	Teacher
	13	People NOT in an educational institution
	(20)	Text
	21	Formal text - e.g. textbooks, magazines, newspapers, business letters, theses, reports, assignments, lectures, business meeting
	22	Informal text - e.g. web board messages, general conversations, chats
	30	A combination of any of the above (Please specify the codes.)
	70	Others (Please specify.)
	Note: 1.If the data is from a corpus, consider whether its source is from 'Formal text', 'Informal text' or both. 2. Some text-related research might use humans as data source. In this case, take it as data from human research, and code as appropriate.	
5	**Type of research instrument refers** to the individual or interactive use-based instrument for the current study.	
	(10)	Individual – This type of instruments can be used alone by the research participant.
	11	A questionnaire
	12	A written report e.g. a journal or diary
	13	A verbal report e.g. think aloud
	14	A test
	15	A written task
	16	A spoken task
	(20)	Interactive – This type of instruments requires at least one person to interact with or to monitor the research participant.
	21	An interview
	22	An observation
	23	A written task
	24	A spoken task
	30	A combination of any of the above (Please specify the codes.)
	70	Others (Please specify.)
	90	NOT applicable (Text-related research)
	Note: 1. If there is a combination of instruments that are listed and not listed, select code 70 (Others). 2. In some text-related research, an instrument (e.g. task, report) may be used. In such case, select code as it is used in human research.	

No.	Category and Code		
	Research method		
6	**Type of analytical method** refers to the way the data in the current study is analyzed.		
	(10)	Statistical method	
	11	Descriptive e.g. frequency, averages, standard deviation	
	12	Inferential e.g. t-test, chi-square, ANOVA, ANCOVA	
	(20)	Non-statistical method	
	21	Preset orientation	
	22	Emergent orientation	
	23	Narrative	
	30	A combination of any of the above (Please specify the codes.)	
	70	Others (Please specify.)	
	90	NOT applicable (NO report of analytical method)	
	00	Cannot identify	
	Note: 1. Inferential statistics by itself covers descriptive statistics. 2. If you spot a p-value, it is inferential. 3. If the non-numerical data is analyzed by coding and then turned into numbers, and analyzed by a statistical method, select 30 (A combination of the above). 4. If there is no indication (at all) of how the data is coded, select 00 (Cannot identify). 5. Consider the analytical method that is both reported and used.		