

## **Collaborative Autoethnography: A Case as Course Developers and Trainers for English for the Front Office**

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### **Abstract**

Assigned by Mars Bureau (pseudonym) to develop and implement the first mega training project in Thailand to prepare tourism professionals for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) job market, we conducted English for Specific Purposes (ESP) literature review to run this mega project. However, in a tourism context, we encountered several challenges during the project development and implementation. This present study, therefore, aims to share our challenging experiences, discover how we overcame them, and determine what lessons we learned. Our methodology was a strategy of narrative inquiry utilizing collaborative autoethnography. The data were two personal written stories guided and intersected by content (interaction, time, and place) and context (micro, meso, and macro) theories through self-reflection from the beginning until the end of project. The data were digitally coded, categorized, and themed with NVivo 12 (qualitative software) following two manual rounds of process coding to support the NVivo 12 results. The findings revealed six categorical issues (internal issues, trainee issues, Mars Bureau representatives, unclear instructions, miscommunication, and plan change, change plan) reaching the theme '*Program Management Challenges*' followed by how we overcame them. The study implications are a reminder for those implementing a mega project to be aware of possible emerging challenges and for a novice researcher to apply suitable methods to their future narrative inquiry project.

**Keywords:** tourism professional development, ESP, narrative inquiry, collaborative autoethnography, process coding

## Introduction

### Intersection of Globalization, ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and English

Aggressive globalization such as labor mobility and increasing multinational enterprises (MNEs) has affected developed countries in the West and even more strongly impacted the ones that are less technologically and economically advanced. This process widened the forms of international financial and economic transaction among developed countries (Narula & Dunning, 2000). As a result, the opening of new markets and tourism through globalization in the Pacific Rim has changed in status from agro-industrial, to newly industrial and from newly industrial to post-industrial (Castells, 1993). It is clear that regardless of where globalization is situated, certain sectors within society, typical bankers and multinational companies, etc., see immediate and positive benefits such as international financial and economic transactions from globalization (Narula & Dunning, 2010). When globalization spread to Southeast Asia in 1980s, it came with the Internet used as a means of international communication which transformed business, education, sciences, medicine and particularly tourism, all of which used English as the medium of communication that even further privileged English (Wiriyachitra, 2002). Tourism was one of the industries which got impacted by the Internet. For example, when people used the Internet to book and confirm their flight, hotel, car, train reservations on websites, they needed to use English for this purpose.

In a response to globalization and in an effort to encourage economic development and unity among the countries of Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1992 (Narine, 2002) and was implemented in January of 2016 ("ASEAN Tourism Professional Registration System", n.d.). Formed by ASEAN, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is a major integration of ten Southeast Asian countries hoping 1) to create a single market, 2) to have greater bargaining power with other big markets across the globe (Yamamoto, 2012) and 3) to allow for the free flow of skilled and unskilled labor across the region without restriction. This, in turn, has mobilized large numbers of skilled and unskilled workers into Thailand and vice versa (Wailerdsak, 2013). The practice of the free flow labor across the region means that not only has there been an influx of workers from neighboring countries, intentionally or not, but also created a thirst for English. In order to navigate communication barriers, members within the AEC utilize English as a *lingua franca* within the workplace and has become an official language of the AEC (Kirkpatrick, 2008a; Nguyen & Ngo, 2015).

As the literature suggested, English has become an official language of the AEC. This has signaled that Thai nationals wishing to work in the AEC should master English at least at a working level. However, to be qualified for working in the AEC, one must have English competencies suitable for his/her job. The next section explains a program 'the Mutual Recognition Arrangements on Tourism Professionals (MRAs

on TP)' which has set out mutual agreement upon English competencies for those mobilizing to work across the AEC.

### **Mutual Recognition Arrangements on Tourism Professionals (MRA on TP)**

The Mutual Recognition Arrangements on Tourism Professionals (MRA on TP) is established by the AEC members to facilitate a free flow of labor across the region and to exchange practical information of job training among the members. It develops a tourism personnel's work competency standards which are approved and accepted among the members ("ASEAN Tourism Professional Registration System," n.d.). That is, the ASEAN members agree on certain sets of competency standards called ASEAN Common Competency Standards for Tourism Professionals (ACCSTP), a training program which describes the required skills and knowledge to perform a job function at the level of a required standard. This training is conducted to train, evaluate, and certify tourism professionals before mobilizing in the AEC. Upon completion of the training, tourism professionals are certified as ASEAN Tourism Professionals (ATPs) and are able to work in the AEC without having to go through qualification examinations in a host country ("ASEAN Tourism Professional Registration System," n.d.).

ASEAN is one of the world top travel destinations (Athanasopoulou, 2013) and the working language of ASEAN is English (Kirkpatrick, 2008b); therefore, enhancing the English language competencies of tourism professionals, especially those working in the front office in hospitality industry, is a priority.

### **Mars Bureau and English for the Front Office**

Mars Bureau (pseudonym) is a large organization responsible for developing and promoting Thailand tourism (Allen & Wiles, 2016). The front office department plays an important role in hospitality industry. To be more precise, it is the front gate for providing any needed assistance to a hotel guest. Therefore, to respond to the importance of MRA on TP, Mars Bureau launched English for the front office. The main targeted trainees were Thai front office managers, front office supervisors, receptionists, telephone operators, and bell boys.

To achieve particular specifications required by ASEAN, the methods of instruction called competency based training (CBT) and competency based assessment (CBA) were adopted to train trainees to work in the tourism and hospitality industry throughout all the ASEAN member states. Clearly, English for the Front Office is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which refers to English language teaching (ELT) to those who use English as a second or foreign language for their particular purpose (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). Precisely, it is to specify trainees' needs and specially design activities for them in order to achieve their learning goals and objectives. However, to design and implement an ESP course is not an easy project,

so the following reviewers share the challenges, issues, and difficulties in designing and implementing an ESP course.

### **Challenges in Developing and Implementing English for Specific Purposes (ESP)**

Designing and implementing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a challenging task because it depends on each context and purposes or target outcomes (Ahmed, 2014; Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015; Basturkmen, 2010; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Kim, 2008; Marcu, 2020; Marwan, 2017; Northcott, 2013).

Students' motivations seem to be a major concern in an ESP course. Marwan (2017) conducted interviews with a number of ESP teachers who experienced difficulties that emerged from developing and implementing ESP courses. He found that students' motivations in ESP courses were lower than the ones in a language course. That is, technical terms, phrases, and language expressions seemed to be more difficult than the ones enrolling in a language class, so they felt demotivated. The mismatch between the aim of an ESP course and students' English proficiency was another issue. That is, ESP content design seemed incompatible with students' English skills, let alone the lack of quality facilities such as good internet connection, language laboratory, library, etc. (Marwan, 2017). In addition, Basturkmen (2010) argued that teachers' lack of ESP knowledge and content had a negative impact on a successful ESP course. The teachers might have found themselves in a difficult position if their content knowledge and experience in the subject were not strong enough to conduct ESP classes (Basturkmen, 2010). Interestingly, Ahmed (2014) shared similar concerns towards teachers' knowledge and background to develop and implement ESP courses. To be more precise, most ESP teachers had a background of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and seemed to be concerned mainly with language pedagogy, so they might have to work harder to learn more of ESP content (Ahmed, 2014). The obvious example is legal English where ESP teachers face difficulties in understanding legal terms. Some even need to take additional courses in legal terminology just to ensure they understand content and terminologies better. If not, involving legal specialists or law teachers for legal English can be the best solution (Northcott, 2013). Undeniably, if the language teachers do not have enough content to teach learners, they have to work closely with content teachers, as just mentioned, concerning legal English. However, not all content and language teachers collaborate well. For example, Arnó-Macià and Mancho-Barés (2015)'s findings suggested that the content teachers tended to be centered toward adding more content into the syllabus for ESP courses and overlooked important usages of English.

However, as Arnó-Macià and Mancho-Barés (2015) attested, having little research or ESP models for a particular course is challenging for those planning to conduct ESP course and we totally agree with them. That is, since there are limited empirical studies for particular ESP courses, designing and

implementing ESP means to start a new process such as finding the right teaching approaches and methods to arrive at the right content for learners' needs. Marcu (2020)'s research problems also confirmed this difficulty. There were no supports, materials, or resources available for English language teachers to design and produce English language in the proper context, for example, in engineering and medical fields. The teachers needed to start from zero to ensure that the manufacturing content matched with the functional language skills required by the job market (Marcu, 2020).

Given all challenges reviewed above, they seem to be centered on different factors such as individuals (students' motivations and teachers' teaching background and confidence); facilities (internet connection, language laboratory, and library); interactions (collaboration); and resources. However, we have different opinions on the factors on people and facilities. Specifically, students' learning motivations depend on several factors: both intrinsic and extrinsic ones. For example, students take this course because they enjoy studying (intrinsic), or they study this course because it is compulsory (extrinsic). Considering teaching background and confidence, we argue that a teaching background in our context is not a major issue. Teachers already have pedagogical knowledge, but only need to do some more research on ESP content. If teachers do well, they will gain more confidence to teach ESP. That leaves a few empirical research factors for a particular ESP course and a lack of necessary supports, materials or resources available. We strongly agree to these challenges which make it difficult to start ESP course development and implementation.

Nevertheless, what sets our study apart from other challenges mentioned above are that they are centered around classroom issues (Ahmed, 2014; Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015; Basturkmen, 2010; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Kim, 2008; Marcu, 2020; Marwan, 2017; Northcott, 2013) which seemed to us as at a micro level, but English for the Front Office course was the first mega training course for tourism professionals to serve the AEC job market which tended to be at a macro level. The ESP teachers worked mainly with their colleagues in school, but we worked mainly with Mars Bureau which did not have experiences in ESP content design and implementation. In addition, Mars Bureau stated with us that this training was the first one they implemented. Therefore, there were no previous training courses (owned by Mars Bureau) which were specially designed for front office personnel. As a result, we did not have any available materials or resources to consult or to start with. In other words, we started from zero. The only things which Mars Bureau provided us were: 1) a list of training topics from ASEAN (mentioned below), 2) training styles and activities such as lecture/tutorial, demonstration, role play, etc., and 3) asking us to conduct pretests and posttests. These are the only specific instructions we had.

Therefore, this present study shares the challenging experiences, how we overcame them, and what lessons we learned as course developers and trainers for English for the Front Office. Our methodology approach was a strategy of narrative inquiry utilizing collaborative autoethnography. The data were our

personal written stories, guided and intersected by Clandinin and Connelly's *content* (interaction, time, and place) and *context* (micro, meso, and macro) theories, through self-reflection from the beginning until the end of project. The data were digitally coded, categorized, and themed (Leavy, 2014) with NVivo 12 (qualitative software) following two manual rounds of *process* coding to support the NVivo 12 results. By this, we hope to answer three research questions: As a course developer and trainer: 1) What were the challenges?; 2) How did we overcome the challenges?; and 3) What are the lessons we learned in this study?

## Methodology

### Narrative Approach: Content and Context

A narrative approach allows us to observe, take note, and share our selected challenging experiences as course developers and trainers for English for the Front Office, so two of us as prospective insiders (course developers) and outsiders (trainers) are able to understand the training phenomenon. Further, this approach allows us to express our analytical and critical lenses towards all challenges we have encountered through personal stories (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Personal stories typically have a temporal dimension *there-and-then, here-and-now* (Rugen, 2013) and are thematically analyzed in detail by systematically focusing on both *content* and *context* (Georgakopoulou, 2015). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000; 2006), personal stories are told and shared based on the three dimensional narrative space called *content* which involves interaction (who); time (when); and place (where) for a particular event or story. Precisely, it shows how the participants, two of us in this case, have interactions with each other and others in the story during a particular time, and in a particular place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Given an importance to the contextual analysis, Barkhuizen (2008) offers *context* approach. It is the three interconnected levels of story, which helps guide us to look beyond the immediate contexts. The three interconnected levels of story are at the *micro, meso, and macro* levels which expand from an individual story telling (micro), to consideration of institutional power (meso), and to social ideologies (macro).

Barkhuizen's (2016) study clearly incorporates both content and context approach in one single study in the ELT context. For the micro level, a teacher has interactions with students in a classroom. From this example, *who* are the teachers and students. *Where* and *when* are when they are having interactions in classroom (where) for a short period of time (when). At this level, a teacher does have the full freedom and authority to conduct the classroom or to revise or change to fit an individual student's needs. For a meso level, it goes beyond the classroom context such as school policies and assessments which teachers have less power or authorities to revise. *Who* represents a teacher and those who create and implement school policies and assessments which have interactions in departmental staff meeting rooms (where) for every

month (when), for example. For the macro level, it involves the national level such as national education and language education policies. For example, policy makers (who) in the ministry of education design the education and language policies and have them implemented nationwide (where) for a certain period of years (when).

In our study, our personal stories are told and shared based on the *content* which is our interactions with Mars Bureau, which has specific instructions for us to follow, and trainees for whom we design the course (Who). The time in our context refers to the day we started to develop the training content and all the way to the day after we submitted the training report to Mars Bureau. It is approximately one year and four months starting from February 2019 to May 2020 (When). The place in our study involves a couple of places where we first developed the training content and where we conducted the training (Where). Therefore, we argue that following analysis of the personal stories guided by the *content* approach followed by the *context* approach will provide a systematic thematic analysis which leads us to interpret our challenging experiences as the course developers and trainers and share the longitudinal research to the public.

Since this article involves two researchers, the method should focus on how the two researchers can work together in order to complete this research. The next section describes characteristics of ‘Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE)’ and how and why it was chosen as a main method for this study.

### **Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE)**

This section starts with the characteristics of collaborative autoethnography, why it is chosen over the other similar approach, and of what limitations we need to be aware.

Collaborative autoethnography, known as CAE, combines collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic dimensions in one single approach, as a qualitative method in which two or more researchers become participants and researchers at the same time (Chang et al., 2016). CAE was originated from autoethnography (AE) which utilized researchers’ challenging experiences as data and showed how the researchers handled and dealt with them through selected, personal compelling, evocative, or heartfelt narratives (Chang, 2011, 2016). CAE and AE have similar approaches of self-focus, researcher visibility, context consciousness, and critical dialogue. Several heartbreaking stories (Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Foster et al., 2006; Olson, 2004; Wyatt, 2008) such as forced abortion, adolescent pregnancy, death, a mental disorder parent, domestic abuses, etc., have employed AE as a guiding method to seek social empathies. However, Chang et al. (2016) clearly state that CAE has more outstanding features than AE. That is, CAE allows the researchers to comment and feedback to each other in order to reduce bias issues when it comes to interpreting the data. This is the power of sharing thoughts and views. The data are also easily collected because it is the researchers’ own experiences. Most importantly, it allows researchers to dig deeper into

each other's experiences when it comes to interesting points. Given these benefits, several studies (Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Hernandez et al., 2015; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017) were conducted using CAE methods and revealed painful results such as racism and classism. Nevertheless, there are some cautions (Chang et al., 2016) which are worthy to be aware of. First, honesty in sharing experience is important, or it will weaken the quality of the data. Then, frequency of communication and a team player attitude are also important, or it will affect the data collection and interpretation. The roles and duties should be clearly assigned as to who is doing what, or there will be confusions resulting in delays in conducting and interpreting research. Most importantly, any problems or issues arising during the research must be addressed, discussed, and solved among the researchers, or it will have a negative impact on trustworthiness (Chang et al., 2016).

In our opinions, the characteristics of the CAE method matches our study method in nature. First, there are two researchers in this present study: authors 1 and 2. Second, our personal stories tend to be critical. To be exact, our stories were based on challenging experiences we had to encounter during the course development and implementation and how we dealt with these emerging issues. Therefore, CAE has been chosen as the main method for our present study. Before we explain the analytical procedures, the following section provides a background of English for the Front Office, to clarify the following analytical procedures.

### **Background of English for the Front Office Training**

Hotel front office personnel recruited across Thailand were divided into three levels: Operational, Supervisory, and Advanced, each consisting of 30-35 participants, all Thais aged around 25-45 years old, working in front office departments in hotels across Thailand such as front office officers, supervisors and managers. Authors 1 and 2 were the course developers and trainers for Supervisory and Advanced levels respectively.

The actual timeline for this training is:

- February-September 2019: Course development or material preparation
- 14-18 October 2019: Course implementation
- November 2019- May 2020: Post course implementation

Each level was trained in a parallel session covering 5 days from 14-18 October 2019 at a hotel in Bangkok. The main competencies for the three levels included:

1. Converse in English at a basic operational level;
2. Respond effectively to instructions given in English;
3. Start conversations and develop good relations with guests;
4. Communicate effectively in English on the telephone;



5. Use oral English to convey a complex exchange of ideas;
6. Deliver a short oral presentation in English;
7. Read and write English at an advanced level;
8. Read and interpret basic directions and/or diagrams;
9. Read general information texts or media;
10. Write a short message in English; and
11. Prepare a business letter in advanced English.

The 11 main competencies are assigned by Mars Bureau. That is, they already decided what they needed us to design and teach. There was no exception to the competency based training (CBT) method as well which includes a variety of training styles and activities including lecture/tutorial, demonstration, group discussions, role play, simulation games, individual/group exercises, group presentation, case study, practice sessions, and games. The competency based assessment (CBA) was adopted to measure the tourism professionals' competencies including pretest, observation, and posttest. However, while Mars Bureau had a list of 11 training topics and how to evaluate, they did not have any previous or relevant training materials or anyone for us to consult with.

### **Research Procedures**

We, English lecturers at a language institute in a public university in Thailand, are researchers and participants in this present study. We have had extensive experiences in conducting English for Specific Purposes for several years. We were ideally assigned to design English for the Front Office training materials within three months then conducted the training right after the training materials were approved by Mars Bureau. Then, one month after the training we needed to produce the final report to Mars Bureau. It was ideally supposed to be five months. However, what happened was that we designed the training materials in February 2019 and conducted the training in October 2019. After the training was done, we needed to revise the training content in order to be included in the final reports submitted in May 2020. From February 2019 to May 2020, it was already one year and four months. Then, we sat down, and had a serious discussion as to why the whole process took long to finish. We shared that it was one of the most challenging experiences we had even encountered as ESP course developers and trainers. That is, tensions emerged during the course development or material preparation (February-September 2019) and training periods (14-18 October 2019) and even after the training (November 2019-May 2020). After the intense discussion, we asked each other 'what would have been better if someone had conducted a similar training and what would we had learnt from them? How useful if others will have benefited from our experience in conducting ESP courses related to hospitality industry. Therefore, we agreed to co-write this paper to share our challenging experiences as the course developers and trainers for English for the Front Office. Then,

we communicated regularly via personal meetings, text messages, and emails, in order to specify as to for what kinds of roles, responsibilities, and job scopes, each of us had assumed. One was responsible for writing introduction and methodology and the other conducted literature reviews. When it came to our own personal stories and analysis, full and concurrent collaborations were adopted.

Our data were written stories (Appendices 1 and 2) according to our selected memories during course development, implementation, and post-implementation. They were guided by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000; 2006) three dimensional narrative space *content* (interaction, time, and place) and *context* approaches. The followings are three guiding questions for our personal stories:

1. What interactions with others did we have from the first day until the training was over?
2. How long was the training project and what took so long to complete the course development?
3. How did the physical settings or places in which the story was located effect the story?

According to the three guiding questions, we asked ourselves, '*As a course developer and trainer, 1) What were the challenges? 2) How did we overcome the challenges? And 3) What were the lessons we learned?*'

After that, we applied *sequential explanatory strategy* by Creswell and Creswell (2017) to reveal emerging challenges from the stories. To be more specific, it starts with quantitative data (QUAN) analysis followed by qualitative (qual) data analysis, then the integration takes place during interpretation phase of the study. That is, the emphasis is more on quantitative than qualitative. The purpose of this strategy is to use qualitative results to complement, support, and confirm the quantitative ones.

To apply this strategy, we divided our analysis into the following three phases:

- Phase 1: Conducting *descriptive coding* using NVivo 12 software to count frequent coding and visualize the results
- Phase 2: Employing *grounded theory* (Cho & Lee, 2014) to manually and inductively code our stories (Saldana, 2014, p.585) to support the quantitative results from Phase 1
- Phase 3: Interpreting the entire analysis

To be more specific, the followings are detailed steps conducting the analysis.

### **Phase 1: Descriptive coding**

1. Before conducting descriptive coding by NVivo 12 software, we needed to prevent bias in our own stories, so we employed the *peer review* strategy by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, pp. 247-248). To be precise, we asked the other two course developers and trainers, who were responsible for the operational training level and who went through similar experiences like us, to provide written comment and feedback on our stories. By this, we ensure that our stories were added with credibility.

2. Then, we applied *member check* strategy (Creswell & Miller, 2000) to ensure that we understood each other's story. To be more specific, we juxtaposed the two stories, commented on each other's, asked each other follow-up questions, took notes, paraphrased, and summarized.
3. After that, we employed descriptive coding (Saldana, 2014) to summarize the challenging topics of data by segmenting and categorizing our notes and repeating the steps until we found our common categorical issues. During the process of segmenting and categorizing to reaching common categorical issues (Leavy, 2014), a qualitative software, NVivo 12 was employed to help detect coding frequency counts and showed it through visualization.
4. Next, we conducted another peer review by the same two persons in Step 1 to review the results. By this, they confirmed our challenging experiences.

### **Phase 2: Grounded theory with two rounds of process coding**

5. Together, we manually conducted the two rounds of coding on our stories. For the first round, we employed *process coding* "which uses gerunds ("-ing" words) exclusively to represent action suggested by the data" (Saldana, 2014, p.585). For the second round, we utilized *process coding* again to "categorize similar or comparable codes into groups for pattern construction and analysis" (Saldana, 2014, p.587). In this way, we saw emerging linguistic themes of our challenging experiences.

### **Phase 3: Interpreting the entire analysis**

6. We discussed the quantitative results from Phase 1 supported by the qualitative results from Phase 2 and concluded what lessons we learned.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The intersectionality of the three levels of *context* (micro, meso, and macro) and the three dimensional narrative space *content* (who, where, when) construct our narrative experience before, during, and after the training.

**Who.** At micro level, each of us worked as one co-course developer who helped design training content, materials, etc. At the meso level, we conducted the training at the hotel where we most spent time with the trainees. At the macro level, before, during, and after the training, we interacted mostly with Mars Bureau representatives who oversaw our training progress.

**When.** At the micro level, for a short period of time, our director was a primary contact between Mars Bureau representatives and us. After meeting with Mars Bureau reps, she assigned us what we needed

to do. At the meso level, we started to work on the training design, content, materials, and evaluations for 8 months. However, at the macro level, it took us from February 2019 to May 2020 which was about one year and four months starting from the contract signing until we submitted the final report to Mars Bureau.

**Where.** At the micro level, we were mostly at our office working on the training content design and evaluations. At the meso level, we spent five days at the training venue which was in the center of Bangkok. At the macro level, Mars Bureau Office was also in the center of Bangkok, so it was convenient for us to travel for a series of meetings.

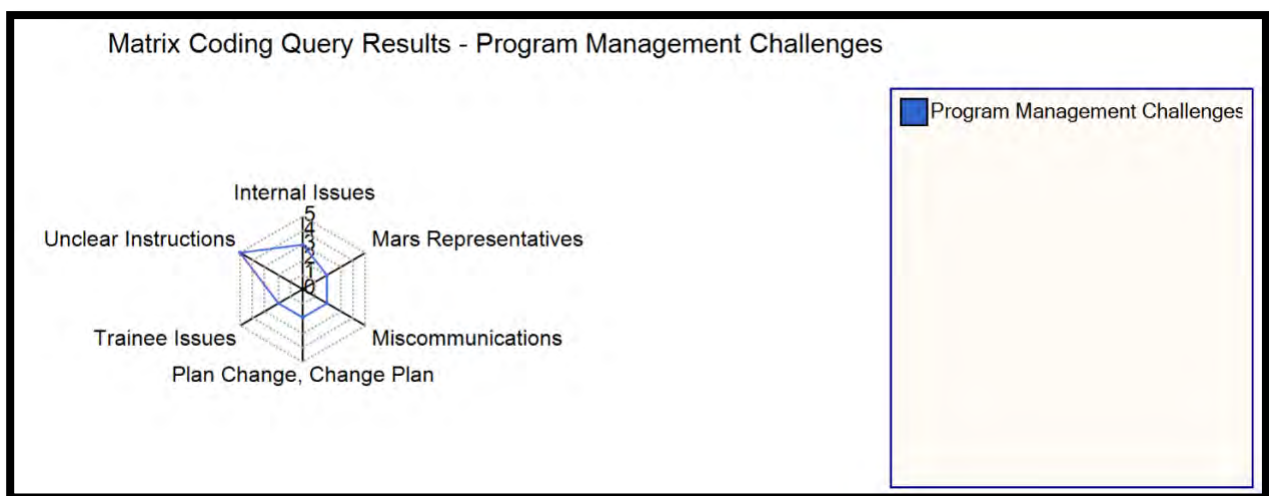
After the intersectionality of *content* and *context* theories, there were challenges which emerged before, during, and after the training in our stories, so in the next section, we shared our challenging experiences preparing and implementing the training based on the results from three phases in the sequential explanatory strategy.

**Phase 1: Descriptive Coding: Challenges**

After descriptive coding by NVivo 12, we reached six common categorical issues which were considered the major theme *Program Management Challenges*. Based on the frequency count, Figure 1 shows how frequent each categorical issue is coded. To be more specific, there were six common categorical issues ranging from the most to the least frequent: 1) unclear instructions (5 frequent codes), 2) internal issues (3 frequent codes), 3) Mars representatives (2 frequent codes), 4) plan change, change plan (2 frequent codes), 5) miscommunication (2 frequent codes), and 6) trainee issues (2 frequent codes).

Figure 1

*Matrix Coding Query of Program Management Challenges*



However, we described six categorical issues based on the causes and effects. That is, we started off the discussion with the internal issues acknowledging our weaknesses followed by realizing trainees' English proficiency challenges. Then, we discussed Mars representatives' working characters and styles resulting unclear instructions and miscommunications between Mars representatives and two of us. As a result, we needed to change the plan to ensure we met Mars Bureau's expectations.

### **1. Internal issues**

This was our first mega training in which we worked solely with Mars Bureau, so there were several persons involved in the training process from our end. This, in turn, required good coordination and communication to ensure that all the training processes were done well. However, according to the first two excerpts below, while each of us had been internally meeting and discussing the training progress in our level, all trainers for the three levels (operations, supervisory, and advanced) did not have the time to sit down and discuss the whole progress of the project together. This internally resulted in several miscommunications and misunderstandings. For example, in the beginning of the project, one level did one kind of format, but the other level did something else. In addition, there were a lot of content competencies to cover. Although we assigned individual responsibilities, we still got confused as to what we should have done. We needed to sit down, start talking, brainstorm, write, etc. because we did not have anyone and anything to consult with, so it consumed a lot of our time. Another challenge was that we did in fact have a native speaker to proofread manuals, but he was reassigned in the middle of the project, so we needed to conduct proofreading ourselves.

1. *"We really lacked the time to sit down and discuss things together, so misunderstanding could easily take place."*
2. *"Then the last challenge was our course developing processes. These processes depended a lot on teamwork. Though we designed carefully who was to do what job, the lack of time and training experiences hindered progress."*
3. *"The native speaker we hired also seemed to be a challenge."*

### **2. Trainee issues**

Our weaknesses were ones that caused training delay and we were aware of this issue. This also resulted in the late opening of training registration. From the following two excerpts, not only did we not get to conduct the trainees' English proficiency test beforehand, but we did not get to know that the trainees had different working backgrounds. We designed the training content, materials, and evaluations without knowing anything about the trainees. This is dangerous and caused us a lot of damage having to adjust the content of the training on the spot.

1. *“The registration was done late, so I did not conduct a trainee’s English pre-test.”*
2. *“The trainees were from different places far and near. They had different levels of English, but they paid great attention on the training and were very enthusiastic.”*

### **3. Mars representatives**

After the issues which involved our internal management, we moved to discuss Mars representatives’ working characters and styles. In fact, we had had several corporate and national trainings but the scale was not this large. However, according to the following two excerpts below, what we experienced working with Mars representatives was the way they communicated with was pretty direct. In addition, instead of focusing on the important points, they chose to raise unimportant points to discuss. For example, in the beginning of the project, we designed the content and activities for their reviews and comments. Instead, they focused on pointing out the wrong formats. In addition, they did not provide much constructive comments. Rather, they just commented in the way which discouraged us.

1. *“They had little or no experiences in training. They only asked us do revise things not important such as formatting this and that rather than focusing on the content and process of the training.”*
2. *“They did not provide much constructive comments.”*

### **4. Unclear instructions**

In addition to Mars representatives’ working characters and styles, there were several unclear instructions causing confusion. As a result, it delayed our work progress because we needed to go back and forth with them. Each time the process of going back and forth took almost a month. For example, according to the following five excerpts, they first confirmed that these activities were fine, but later, they asked us to add more and more activities. They also asked us to change the formats such as adjusting paragraphs, wordings, spaces, etc. several times. This had gone on for several months.

1. *“The other course developer resigned from the team because she had experienced several unclear instructions from Mars Bureau weakening her health at that time. I felt the same way as she did and totally understood her because most instructions such as training material formats and content had not been clear.”*
2. *“Over a course of 8 months from February to September 2019, the topics, content, and training manual formats kept being changed.”*
3. *“There was no clear cut directions as to what exact formats a training manual must be.”*
4. *“They asked us to redo the format, to adjust the paragraphs, wordings, and even the spaces between words.”*

5. *“Those personnel from Mars Bureau sometimes substituted their roles and reordered us to redo the text and add on more and activities.”*

### **5. Miscommunication**

After the unclear instructions, miscommunications causing misunderstandings also took place. That is, according to the two excerpts below, we understood the ‘lead-in’ section in a training manual in different ways. The lead-in section was the first section in each competency manual. In our view, it was an activity to inductively lead the trainees to the main objectives of this competency, but Mars representatives saw it differently as only content written to lead the trainees to the language and expressions. After we had finished all the manuals, Mars representatives asked us to revise this section for the whole manual. In addition, the comments and feedback for training content came from different Mars representatives, so we got confused as to who was the one marking our manuals.

1. *“We understood ‘lead-in’ section in a training manual in different ways.”*
2. *“As for communication, the contact between Mars Bureau and us was not set systematically.”*

### **6. Plan Change, Change Plan**

In addition to miscommunications, we also faced changes all the time resulting in our plans to be changed as well. For example, at first, Mars representatives gave us the full authority to design and come up with the training content as we saw appropriate. However, after we finished the first drafts of all the manuals, they asked us not to include some parts. Later, they asked us to add those deleted parts back again. Some comments and formats were also not consistent each time. This in turn caused us to change all plans and activities in the manuals.

1. *“Mars Bureau instructed us not to include some sections in a training manual, but later, they asked us to do so. This had been going on until the training started.”*
2. *“Mars Bureau asked us to include at least 4-5 out of 11 ASEAN competencies in a training manual which, I believed, was too many to cover in 30 hours for each level.”*

Internal weaknesses, trainees’ unexpected English proficiency and backgrounds, Mars representatives’ working characters and styles, unclear instructions, miscommunications, and ongoing plan changes are all challenges which we encountered, and this has answered the research question 1 *“What were the challenges?”*. In addition, the peer review results also confirmed these challenges. In the next section, we revealed qualitative results by grounded theory to confirm these challenges.

### **Phase 2: Grounded Theory with Two Rounds of Process Coding**

After inductively conducting the two rounds of processing coding, there were 46 codes from the first round. Then, in the second round, they were categorized into the following six categories.

Category 1: Experiencing Internal Issues

Category 2: Experiencing Trainee Issues

Category 3: Experiencing Issues from Mars Bureau

Category 4: Experiencing Unclear Instructions

Category 5: Regretting What Could Have Been Done

Category 6: Feeling Happy

### **Phase 3: Interpreting the Entire Analysis**

According to six categories in Phase 2, Categories 1-4 seemed to complement and support the challenges revealed in Phase 1. However, Category 5 was interesting because it showed that we regretted what could have been done. Also, while most categories seemed negative, Category 6 appeared to be the only positive results which made us happy during the training such as “Having a great time during the training”, “Having constructive comments for the trainees”, and “Making me richer and riper in English training for tourism”.

Therefore, after the first and second rounds of processing coding, we concluded that the major theme in Phase 2 *Project Management Problems* complemented and supported the challenges in Phase 1. In the next section we share how we overcame these challenges before, during, and after the training.

### **Overcoming Challenges**

According to all the challenges covered above, it seemed to us that they happened on the spot, and we did not have time to prepare much, but to solve the problems in front of us one way or another as this excerpt suggested.

*“We had to solve a lot of problems dealing with these obstacles.”*

Concerning the drop out of the co-course developer, we did not have time to recruit a new one, so according to the following excerpt, we needed to cover all jobs by ourselves.

*“We could not recruit anyone, so I was responsible for the whole supervisory level.”*

When we did not get to conduct the trainees’ English proficiency test, on the first day of training, we observed their English and tried to urge them to speak English. In this way, we learned how well or poorly they used English. From the following excerpts, during the training, we adjusted the lessons to be simpler. This meant we had to skip some parts which were difficult and spent more time on the easier parts. At the end of each day, we revisited the next day’s training content and saw where we could revise or



change to best fit their abilities. We customized our training materials including the ones found through the application of different technologies.

1. *“I had to adjust the activities during the training because I had not known the trainees’ English proficiency level while designing the content and activities.”*
2. *“My team also got great constructive comments from the trainees. I was impressed by their great attempt to overcome their English problems by reading, YouTubing, Googling and the application of technologies.”*
3. *“We also included some extra materials that met their needs and suggested more sources for information and further research.”*

Regarding all the changes that we had to make, from the following excerpts, there was nothing we could do. We did not have any written agreements indicating as to how the maximum number of drafts we had to do. However, we understood that this was the first mega English training which Mars Bureau did, so there were no ready-made topics, content, and formats to follow. Yet, how great would it have been if we had the ready-made versions of training content and materials to which we could apply? In the end, we needed to get together and actively collaborated to ensure we got the training done.

1. *“I could not do anything about it, but to keep doing changes as instructed by Mars Bureau.”*
2. *“We had to put our heads and hands together and collaborated in writing, adding activities and polishing the writing as well as doing the proofreading several times to make the book as perfect as we could.”*

These were challenges that we had to overcome some of which we needed to solve the problems on the spot and some others we had some extra time to adjust. The above was how we had overcome the challenges, and this has answered the research question 2 *“How did we overcome the challenges?”* In the next section, we shared our lessons learned from all the challenges we faced in order to provide some guiding advice for future trainings to come.

### **Categories of Lessons Learned**

After all the challenges, the following is a list of seven categorical guidelines for future research or future collaborations that may be considered in order to prevent the issues.

1. Preparing to replace a trainer: The trainer’s replacement should be planned accordingly in case there is a reassignment or drop off in the middle of project.
2. Conducting trainees’ English proficiency: Trainees’ English proficiency and background information should be conducted before the training starts, so we know trainees’ enough English proficiency and background information. This could be in a form of short paragraph writing or a

short VDO clip introducing themselves. By this, we will be able to know roughly how trainees use English and know their background information.

3. Agreeing on content, drafts and formats: There should be a mutual written agreement concerning as to what content, how many drafts, and what format are preferred by both parties.
4. Setting a clear timeline: There should be a clear timeline for submitting the training drafts for a project owner's review and approval.
5. Appointing an official focal person: There should be an official appointment of a focal point person from two parties in the first place in order to prevent miscommunications and understandings.
6. Having a mutual checklist: There should be a checklist for two parties and have them sign as evidence of work progress.
7. Having a regular meeting: There should be a series of meetings between the two parties as well as internal meetings to ensure there were no miscommunications and misunderstandings.

These are the importance of all lessons learned we share in this present study, so this has also answered the research question 3 “*What are the lessons we learned?*”

### **Conclusions and Limitations**

We have so far shared our challenging experiences as course developers and trainers for English for the Front Office through a *content* and *context* narrative approach and a strategy of inquiry: collaborative autoethnography (CAE). The findings are the emerging categorical issues reaching to the theme ‘*Program Management Challenges*’ which we hope will be evidence for future collaborations with any large organizations to avoid these mistakes. However, we are aware that our data were small, but they are the nature of a short story. In addition, the findings from this present study may be already known to the readers, but they can be a reference before developing and implement a mega project. Further, the findings may not generalize that all Mars representatives’ working characteristics and styles are portrayed this way. This is only one perspective from our side which we would like to share our challenging experience working with them. We are, in fact, aware of our own weaknesses which can be learned by others as well.

### **Suggested Implementation**

#### **Being initiative**

All the challenges we faced are project management issues which we should have seen them coming. We acknowledge that we also are a part of these challenging experiences ourselves. While we have had professional experiences in corporate and national trainings, we struggled dealing with the mega training level. We should have been the one who took the initiative by applying in what we specialized

called *effective and efficient project management*. That is, we should have proposed Mars Bureau how to plan, organize, monitor, and control all aspects of this project such as the schedule, budget, timeline as well as performance criteria we mutually needed to achieve.

### **Assigning project manager role**

Most importantly, the role of project manager should have been officially assigned (Radujković & Sjekavica, 2017). The person taking this role is not only responsible for the schedule, budget, and time management, but also dealing with miscommunications, risk and quality management. This became an issue because we lacked a focal point person to oversee the overall project progress from our end.

### **Utilizing project management tools to monitor progress**

Keeping the crossed teams on track can be challenging. However, there are both paid and free project management tools to solve this issue. For example, a paid subscription of Monday.com is suggested because it is a user friendly which creates crossed teams' workflow, timeline, time tracking, due date alerts, status update, etc. in just minutes. The crossed team members just register themselves and get started without any training required. It is also integrated with Zoom, Microsoft Team, Google shared drives, Google Docs, etc. Google shared drives are spaces for storing all documents such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Google Docs are live documents which crossed teams can co-editing at the same time. Google Calendar can be set as a shared calendar which crossed team members can set plans, timeline, reminders, etc.

### **Perceiving success**

Nevertheless, there is another project management success factor '*perceived success*' (Ika, 2009). That is, all persons involved in the project reflected on their experience after the project was done. This is not the results of staff, customers, or stakeholders' evaluation survey or in the form of final report. Rather, it is in a form of narrative. In our case, while we faced a number of challenges and issues in this project, according to Ika's (2009) findings, we considered ourselves successful. That is, we came out and reflected on our personal stories internally and publicly based on the challenging experiences we encountered during the course development and implementation and how we dealt with the emerging issues. In this way, we did not only get to experience and solve challenging tasks, but we also acknowledged our weaknesses for the sake of future research or future collaborations with any companies.

### Research Implications

Obviously, the research results can be a reminder for those who are working with a second party to prevent any mistakes. A novice researcher can also benefit from triangulated theories and research analytical procedures for a sake of trustworthiness. That is, this study looks at the personal stories from the lens of content (who, where, when) and context (micro, meso, and macro). In addition, it adds credibility on the stories by member checking strategy, and on the research results by peer review strategy. Moreover, this study employs mixed methods to triangulate data analysis: Digitally frequent codes versus manually frequent codes. Lastly, given all the challenges we had, this training was successfully implemented which made us look beyond just being English teachers in the training. That is, the training provides trainees opportunities to overcome their English problems, to practice lifelong learning, to apply what they trained with us at work, and to establish relationship and connection among trainers and trainees.

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### **Appendix 1: Author 1's Personal Story (Supervisory Level)**

*“Concerning interactions, before the training, two of us (course developers) were assigned by our director to equally work together on a course development and training of Supervisory level. We had worked closely through a series of meetings, virtual conferences, and group line in order to discuss and make decisions on training contents and materials. However, the other course developer resigned from the team because she had experienced several unclear instructions from Mars Bureau weakening her health at that time. I felt the same way as she did and totally understood her because most instructions such as training material formats and contents had not been clear. We could not recruit anyone, so I was responsible for the whole supervisory level. Lesson learned? I should have planned for teacher replacement. During the training, I mostly interacted with trainees mostly related to training contents and activities. I also interacted with Mars representatives overseeing our training.*

*At the training, sometimes, I needed to adjust some activities because of trainees' English proficiency and preparation time issues, but Mars reps asked me to follow the activities in the training manuals. I had to adjust the activities during the training because I had not known the trainees' English proficiency level while designing the contents and activities. The registration was done late, so I did not conduct a trainee's English pretest. I totally understood the reps' intention, but I also needed to fix the problems in front of me first too, so I had to adjust the contents and activities when necessary. Lesson learned? I should have made sure that, at least, I knew trainees' English proficient before I designed the course. After the training, I did not get to physically interact with Mars reps. However, they asked me to adjust the contents based on trainees' comments and feedback for the purpose of final training material submission to Mars Bureau. I believed this was useful for future development of this training, so no lessons learned on this point.*

*Concerning timing, before the training, our director was a primary contact with Mars Bureau. She was instructed as to what topics, contents, and training manual formats we were supposed to design. However, over a course of 8 months from February to September 2019, the topics, contents, and training manual formats kept being changed all the way until the training started. In fact, the training was supposed to start in June 2019, but it was postponed until October 2019. This was due to all changes we had to make. I was very confused and exhausted. In addition, there were a lot of miscommunications between my side*

*and Mars Bureau. For example, we understood 'Lead-in' section in a training manual in different ways. I thought it was an activity to lead trainees to the main contents because I believe that inductive approach was the best to train adults, but Mars Bureau thought it was only a content written to lead the trainees to the main contents. Further, Mars Bureau instructed us not to include some sections in a training manual, but later, they asked us to do. This had been going on until the training started. Moreover, Mars Bureau asked us to include at least 4-5 out of 11 ASEAN competencies in a training manual which, I believed, was too much to cover in 30 hours for each level. Also, there was no clear cut directions as to what exact formats for a training manual must be. This resulted in multiple revisions only just to address the precise and correct formats. This was the main reason why this training took long to finish. I could not do anything about it, but to keep doing changes as instructed by Mars Bureau. I understood that this was the first mega English training which Mars Bureau did, so there were no ready-made topics, contents, and formats to follow, but how great would it have been if we had the ready-made versions of training contents and materials which we could apply. Also, I should have made clear with Mars Bureau as to what contents in each section there should be and should have asked for the main format from Mars Bureau. Most importantly, how many exact revisions we should have agreed with Mars Bureau or it ended up like my case that I had to revise until Mars Bureau approved. Revising multiple drafts of training manuals was a main reason why this training took long to finish. During the training, it took 5 days to finish as planned. I had a great time teaching the trainees. After the training, I still needed to revise the contents according to trainees' comments and feedback and it took me about two months to complete. Again, the issues were about the precise formats we needed to ensure 100% correction.*

*Concerning the physical settings, I spent most of my time, out of teaching schedules, designing this course at a university where (I am a full time lecturer) was out of town. Mars Bureau office overseeing this project was in town at that time. Also, the training venue was held in a center of Bangkok where was accessible to anyone to come. Therefore, the physical settings, where I designed the contents and conducted the training, did not have any effects on my story because we did communicate via line group message and conference calls.*

#### **Appendix 2: Author 2's Personal Story (Advanced Level)**

*"As a course developer, I shared this work with my team. We took care of the Advanced Level and planned our work systematically. The team allocated responsibilities to each team members and met with one another to update our progress and problems actively and constantly. However, developing a course did not turn out as smoothly as we expected. To me, the challenges derived from 3 folds: Mars Bureau's contact persons/ team, communication, course developing processes.*



*In terms of Mars's contact persons, I found out that they had no experiences in training. They had little or no experiences in training. They only asked us to do things not important such as formatting this and that rather than focusing on the content and process of the training. Their filing skills were messy, which had made our communication failed and resulted in repetitions and unorganized work. We had spent tremendous time on rearranging the 'book' or text based on their unprofessional deeds. For instance, they asked us to redo the format, to adjust the paragraphs, wordings, and even the spaces between words. These headaches caused the delay in combining the ideas from different team members among us. Those personnel from Mars Bureau sometimes substituted their roles and reordered us to redo the text and add on more and activities. Besides, they did not provide much constructive comments. As of communication, the contact between Mars Bureau and us was not set systematically. It took us a lot of time to get back the text though we had our contact persons. We really lacked the time to sit down and discuss things together, so misunderstanding could easily take place. Then the last challenge was our course developing processes. These processes depended a lot on the teamwork. Though we designed carefully who was who to do the job, the lack of time and training experiences hindered the progress. We had to solve a lot of problems dealing with these obstacles. For instance, we had to put our heads and hands together and collaborated in writing, adding activities and polishing the writing as well as did the proofreading several times to make the book as perfect as we could. The native speaker we hired also seemed to be a challenge.*

*There were several lessons learned from this part. On our part, I think we may have to be tougher and look into the agreement more carefully. In communication, we should have a list to check with Mars Bureau and have them sign the work progress and how much we have solved the problem(s) or our solution each time. There should be one special person to take this role. We should keep the texts for later use and we should revise them right after the training ended.*

*As a trainer, I think I enjoyed this part a lot. The hotel was fine, but the training rooms were a bit too small. The parking zone is frightening for me.*

*During the training though we struggled a lot from the creating of each text, the trainees and our training spirits made the job much lighter. The trainees were from different places far and near. They had different levels of English, but they paid high attention on the training and were very enthusiastic. I had got more friends and learned more about hotel businesses and tourism. There are people who do different jobs everywhere, and they join hands to make tourism outstanding. It is absolutely true that our Thai culture and etiquettes are gifts that always capture the tourists' hearts. My team also got great constructive comments from the trainees. I was impressed by their great attempt to overcome their English problems by reading, you-Tubing, googling and the applications of technologies. We also included some extra materials that met their needs and suggested more sources for information and further research.*

*In sum, both roles made me richer and riper in English training for tourism. The teamwork, careful planning, technology as well as relevant and flexible activities are always keys to success. Though technologies have helped us a lot, they can never replace manpower. English plays very important roles in all professions in this 21st century and beyond. It is our job to teach, to train, and to learn more. In short, life-long learning and collaboration make the time well-spent and life easier as well as more fruitful.”*

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