Language Syllabus from Student Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Although many countries in East Asia have continually improved English curriculum policies to upgrade the standards of English teaching and to stay competitive in the global economy, only a few have had the impact they projected, mostly because they lacked qualified school teachers. As the Ministry of Education in Thailand has promoted school-based English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum and syllabus development to empower local school teachers to plan and design their own language education programs, not only in-service teachers' but also student teachers' perceptions play a vital role in determining their readiness to take the active role required by the educational reform policy. Through a focus group discussion, this case study aims to uncover Thai EFL student teachers' perceptions of the language syllabus and the role of syllabuses in language teaching and learning. The results suggest that teacher training programs should develop a thorough understanding of language syllabuses for pre-service teachers, and prepare them for taking on the role of independent syllabus designers. This case study raises an awareness of the significant role of teacher education in developing autonomous teachers who can independently develop curricula and syllabuses, particularly in contexts where English curriculum and syllabus development used to be centralized.

1 Introduction

In this era of globalization, English is defined as a core subject in school curricula worldwide. Many countries have a unit of government authority which plans and implements language curricula, while teachers are curriculum implementers and syllabus designers. Indeed, the role of the language teacher as a syllabus designer has been acknowledged long ago since the 1980s, as Breen (1984) had stated that language teachers were no longer consumers of other people's (i.e. mostly applied linguists' and government authorities') planned syllabuses. Teachers are now seen as skillful practitioners who can understand the course design process, activate the course, prepare and present the content, evaluate and make decisions when problems occur, and revise the course when necessary. In addition, as there has been a long history of how the principles of syllabus design for English courses have been still continually changing, it is crucial for the language teacher as a course designer to keep up with these changes to design suitable syllabuses for their classroom contexts.

In Thailand, the policy of decentralized school curriculum has been adopted by the Ministry of Education since 1999 (ONEC, 1999), to enforce curriculum development and promote school-based planning and teaching. As a result, all state school teachers are encouraged to strategically design their own school curricula and course syllabuses to serve the needs of local learners and stakeholders. That is, while the national curriculum acts as a platform that frames some essential learning outcomes and contents to be considered and included in schools' curricula, school authorities and teachers are supposed to study the needs of local stakeholders, such as students, their parents and

teachers are expected to be able to plan, manage, and evaluate their classroom teaching and learning to make sure that the students are equipped with the expected knowledge and skill outcomes.

The reformed curriculum's idea of localizing language teaching seems to have the potential to generate positive results in EFL education in Thailand. In the long term, it could possibly be beneficial to many sectors involved if the local school planners and teachers are able to decide on how to give their students what they want and need in terms of language teaching and learning, instead of merely following what is framed by the policy makers who do not know about the needs of local communities. However, there are certain difficulties that have to be made known to the government authorities in order for them to find appropriate solutions while implementing the educational reform policy. For example, Chayaratheee and Waugh (2006) found that some teachers chose to conveniently adopt commercial textbooks suggested by well-known publishers as their syllabuses. They believed the books were designed according to the specifications found in the national curriculum. Thus, this would ensure that teaching and learning would not deviate from the curriculum's requirements.

After reviewing some previous research closely linked to this topic of curriculum implementation and syllabus design in different contexts (e.g. Chayaratheee & Waugh, 2006; Hayes, 2010; Mackenzie, 2002; Prapaisiti de Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Wang, 2008), most studies (e.g. Sato, 2002; Wang, 2008; Yoon, 2004) show that school teachers have insufficient knowledge and understanding about how and why they should implement the national curriculum prescribed and introduced by government authorities. Furthermore, some major impediments to curriculum implementation were identified in previous studies; these include a lack of qualified policy makers and syllabus developers in schools (Yu, 2001), a lack of teachers' adherence to core curriculum, and a lack of teaching and learning resources (Iskandar, 2015). While these results reveal that in-service teachers have issues with the implementation of curriculum to a syllabus, only a few researchers (e.g. Alba, 2014; Chanie, 2013) have examined the problem and possibility of student teachers in accepting the role of the teacher as a syllabus designer. Clearly, a gap in research exists, and student teachers as the grassroots of the educational system should receive more concern, starting with the study of their perceptions toward language syllabuses and their role in language teaching and learning.

Therefore, this study aims to use a focus group discussion method to study the perceptions of Thai student teachers toward language syllabuses and the role of syllabuses in EFL teaching and learning. Specifically, there are two research questions, which are: (1) How do student teachers in Thailand perceive the language syllabus?; and (2) How do they perceive the role of the syllabus in EFL teaching and learning? This article contends that the case study of this type can be used in contexts where language curriculum and syllabus development is decentralized to reflect the current state of the knowledge that student teachers have about the language syllabus and what perceptions they should attain to become an independent syllabus designer.

2   Literature review

2.1   Definitions and the significant role of the syllabus in EFL teaching and learning

This section begins with a conceptualization of language syllabus by differentiating it from the curriculum. To conceptualize the term *language syllabus*, it is necessary to also define the term *language curriculum*, since they are closely connected. Generally, people often use the two terms interchangeably, but theorists and educators rather consider a syllabus as a subsidiary component of a curriculum. Comparing it to a curriculum, Nunan (1993) sees a syllabus as focusing more narrowly on a selection of teaching content and material at the classroom level. In other words, while curriculum is a macro educational plan, which could be nationalized or localized for long-term design, syllabus planning is designed and revised based on accounts and records of what happens in the classroom. According to Graves (2000), a syllabus encompasses narrowly defined objectives, and operational statements of teaching and learning elements. It provides a sense of direction to the teacher and students to plan and monitor what will be taught and learnt in the course. Habanek

(2005) also sees the syllabus as a preview of course information that displays the teaching philosophy to students. Therefore, the designs of a classroom syllabus play a major role in showing how the national curriculum is interpreted and implemented by the syllabus designer. According to Candlin (1984), a syllabus is also a tool that the teacher uses to encourage learners to challenge the pedagogical ideologies and perceptions about language teaching that he or she brings to the class. This idea is especially true of the kind of negotiable syllabuses which empower learners to actively participate in planning the language course.

In some countries, such as Vietnam (Canh & Barnard, 2009) and Libya (Orafi & Borg, 2009), there is a unit of authority, usually in the ministry of education, which is responsible for planning and developing the national standard curriculum. The national curriculum pre-specifies content that needs to be taught, and the expected learning outcomes to be achieved by every state school across the country. This strategy for curriculum implementation is called *power-cohesive strategy* (Chin, 1967), which is a top-down imposition of prescribed curriculum. On the contrary, the curriculum enactment perspective (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992) views the curriculum as being formulated by classroom teachers and students in the enacted experience of the classroom, and that it should be flexible. The decentralization of curriculum development is in line with this curriculum enactment perspective in that the national curriculum is used as a guideline for school teachers or policy makers to design their own curricula and syllabuses.

2.2   *Language syllable types*

Changes in the theories of language and language learning have influenced innovative designs of language curriculum and syllabus. The traditional syllabus designs are known as *Type A syllabuses* (Nunan, 1988) and focus on the selection and grading of language content and assessment methods carried out by the teacher. The main advantage of these syllabuses lies in its nature of being explicit and encompassing a systematic plan, "which helps many teachers and learners feel secure and appreciate being able to review what they have covered regarding the building blocks of language" (Hedge, 2000, p. 346). Although this traditional approach to syllabus design has been used widely in many contexts in which English is used as a foreign language, the main limitation is that it overlooks how language is naturally used and how communicative skills in addition to linguistics knowledge should be developed. On the other hand, *Type B syllabuses* (e.g. *task-based syllabus*, *content-based syllabus*, and *procedural syllabus*; Nunan, 1988), with an emphasis on how language should be learned, and what language learning tasks and activities should be selected, emerged as differing products of progressivism.

The development of language syllabus designs, as studied and explained by Kranhnke (1987), Smith and Mare (1990), and Brown (1995) are summarised and illustrated in Figure 1. They examined six types of syllabuses as a continuum, rather than a separation of different types of syllabuses. The continuum begins with a syllabus based mostly on teaching language structure (form), and ending with one based mostly on encouraging language use (meaning).

Structural Syllabus	Focus on grammatical and phonological structure: sequence based on frequency/difficulty	
Notional-Functional Syllabus		Focus on functions such as identifying, reporting, agreeing, refusing: sequence based on chronology/usefulness
Situational Syllabus	Focus on situations (at a party, at a conference), topics, or themes (leisure time, health) : sequence by likelihood of encounter	
Skill-based Syllabus	Focus on skills (listening to, two-way interpretation, note-taking): sequence by chronology/usefulness of the skills	
Task-based Syllabus	Focus on tasks or activities (creating a brochure for tourists, drafting a plan): sequence by chronology or usefulness or activity	
Content-based Syllabus		Focus on content that the students are also learning (history class taught in English): sequence by chronology or difficulty of the content

More Emphasis on Form → More Emphasis on Meaning

Fig. 1. Language syllabus types

There is another type of process-based syllabus called procedural or *negotiable syllabus* (Breen, 1984), which was invented in response to the notion of a fixed syllabus. It is a learner-led syllabus; its direction and content are not fixed, but are negotiable and flexible instead. The advantage of this negotiable syllabus is that "the teacher and students work together with the study focus and testing format negotiable. What happens in class is internal to the learner" (White, 1988, pp. 44–47). However, many applied linguists argue that an extreme negotiable syllabus is unrealistic (Brumfit, 1984; Long & Crookes, 1992; Widdowson, 1987). Evidence of this can be found in Griffee's (1995) experiment, which was conducted to study whether procedural syllabuses could work well or not in the Japanese English language teaching context. He concluded that although the flexible and negotiable approach to the syllabus design was theoretically sound, in the actual class, the Japanese students were unable to define their own goals and objectives for classroom learning.

According to White (1988), there is no one best type of syllabus for all language courses across different situational contexts. To choose the syllabus that is most appropriate for his or her class, a teacher should have a thorough understanding of the respective syllabuses. Teachers who have freedom in designing their own syllabuses can start from conducting environmental and needs analyses, then selecting contents, materials, and activities for language teaching. However, a significant number of teachers are denied a role in the planning stage, for decisions regarding the syllabus type are taken by the government or school authorities, which determine the teaching goals, contents, and materials for them. This approach is known as the "specialist approach" (Johnson, 1989) – an approach to syllabus development where the course designer is not the teacher. The teachers are only responsible for realizing the pre-defined goals and objectives, writing the lesson, presenting the contents, and monitoring and evaluating the learning. Most educational planners in Thailand tend to follow this approach, because it is easy to assure and assess the quality of education across the country. However, the specialist approach does not aim to promote classroom-based syllabus development, and thus teachers may not see themselves as qualified syllabus designers.

Regarding the reform movement toward the decentralization of EFL curriculum and syllabus design in Thailand, the teachers' perceptions of themselves as being active implementers play a critical role in determining the success of curriculum implementation. This is because the perceptions determine how the teachers interpret information inputs initiated by the government authorities and what they tend to do as language teachers. Most previous research on curriculum implementation reported some mismatches between the perceptions held by the school teachers and the curriculum's underlying theories of language teaching and learning. These studies, such as Grossman and Thompson (2008), and Bjork (2009) also show that teachers' perceptions and beliefs are crucial factors affecting the process of curriculum implementation. Teachers who were not trained to adapt

to educational reformed policies may feel reluctant to implement curricula in the way they are expected to do, and revert to what they normally do in classrooms. For example, Li (1998) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing in-service EFL teachers in China about the national English language education policy. Similarly, Nguyen (2011) conducted a case study in Vietnam and found that teachers did not implement the teaching methodology suggested in the new curriculum policy, because there was a lack of comparable changes in teacher training. In Indonesia, Yuwono and Harbon (2010) found two main difficulties most EFL teachers have when developing a language course, which are a lack of English education background, and a lack of training for developing teaching courses in different contexts.

The studies cited were conducted with a focus on in-service teachers, although pre-service teachers also have vital role in determining the success of language education development. Student teachers are future in-service teachers and the knowledge and perceptions they have gained, whether right or wrong, will be brought to real-life teaching and eventually affect the totality of the language education system. a study that reveals student teachers' perceptions toward the syllabus could help determine the level of knowledge they should be provided with in teacher training courses to develop their professional readiness for taking on the role of an autonomous teacher.

3 Methods

This research involved a qualitative case study using a focus group discussion method for data collection. Case studies such as this help explore what a specific group of people think, feel, or perceive about a topic (Sommer & Sommer, 2002). The method of focus group discussion was adopted, because it promotes participants' interactions, and allows for reflections on their views of the syllabus. Focus groups are more efficient than quantitative survey or individual interview in that all research participants are stimulated to express their perceptions and contribute to the discussion at a single time. The data recorded from the focus group discussions were analysed using the interpretation method. The methodological framework of this research is illustrated in Figure 2.
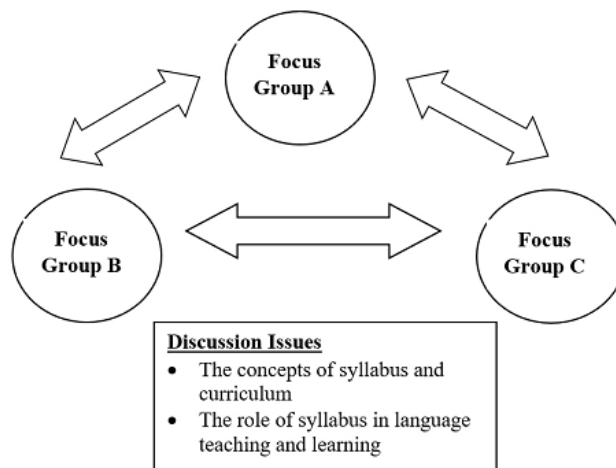

Fig. 2. Methodological framework

3.1 Participants

The data were collected from multiple cases of informants who were purposively selected from the three state universities. Two were based in Bangkok and the other was based in a northern province of Thailand. All of them were at state universities which have connections with local state demonstration schools where senior student teachers can complete a practicum experience. The

choice of the universities was based on the fact there are no state universities in Bangkok which provide teacher education and have such connection with local state demonstration schools that are ranked low.

The student teachers were selected on the basis that they were senior students who had passed the course on language course and syllabus design, and were equipped with some basic principles related to these issues. There were 6 participants per group. Each group was small enough to allow genuine discussion (Sommer & Sommer, 2002). To protect their confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to the universities and the participants, and the rankings were determined according to Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant information

	Faculty/University	Location	Rank	Participant		Year of Study	Practicum Experience (one semester)
				Female	Male		
Group A	Faculty of Humanities, Public University A	Bangkok, Thailand	Medium	3	3	Senior	Secondary Classroom
Group B	Faculty of Education, Public University B	Bangkok, Thailand	High	2	4	Senior	Secondary Classroom
Group C	Faculty of Humanities, Public University C	Northern province, Thailand	Low	3	3	Senior	Secondary Classroom

3.2 Data collections

The data for this study were collected through focus group discussions conducted at different places and time. For each of the focus group discussions, the researcher, as the moderator, first explained the research aim, and then distributed the questions for discussion (see Appendix 1) to each participant. To avoid the effect of group pressure, the participants were asked to answer the questions individually by writing on the provided paper, before sharing their perceptions with the group members. The researcher also gave a brief explanation to each question to help the participant understand the discussion point. At the end of the discussion, the participants were asked to report a summary of their discussions in a written format and hand the individual as well as the group answers to the researcher. The discussions were conducted in Thai. The data were recorded and translated into English for further analysis and discussion.

3.3 Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews were systematically analysed to find patterns of ideas emerging from the data. First, the data from the interview transcriptions were analytically read, and the reflective memo writing and coding methods were applied to find any regularities or patterns of ideas from the participants. Since the topics for discussion were already defined by the researcher, *In Vivo Coding* (Saldana, 2013) was used to code the perceptions of the themes rooted in the participants' own discourse. This coding method extracts codes directly from words or phrases that the

participants said. Then the categories which emerged from the codes were labelled and made available for reporting as research results.

4 Results

4.1 The student teachers' perceptions of language syllabus

The student teachers from Group A perceived a syllabus as a compilation of assembled detailed information about the course, including the course objectives, learning content, credit requirement, teaching and learning duration, and assessment system. Some students from this group said that teaching methods (e.g. lecture, group work, or seminar) and activities should also be specified in a syllabus. They also noted that the content in the syllabus should conform to that specified in the curriculum.

While the Group B participants had quite similar perceptions, they added the idea that a syllabus was also a long-term planning produced by the teachers to clarify the learning content and activities for each week starting from the first until the last day of the term. The conceptions of syllabus that these groups of student teachers revealed coincided with the notion of the Type A syllabus. For this syllabus type, the content is planned in a static and fixed format prior to the course (Nunan, 1988).

For the student teachers from Group C, the perceptions of the group members toward a syllabus were mixed. Most of them defined the syllabus as activities, such as:

> Group C_1: A syllabus is "defining what students will learn from the course".
> Group C_2: A syllabus is "the process of analysing what students will learn from the course".
> Group C_3: A syllabus is "understanding and analysing curriculum".
> Group C_5: A syllabus is "teaching learning techniques".

These perceptions of a syllabus as cognitive and teaching activities as defined by the student teachers are incoherent with the theoretical grounded definition which rather views a syllabus as an interpretation and implementation of language learning policy and expected learning outcomes stated in the curriculum (Grave, 2000).

When asked about the similarities and differences between syllabus and curriculum, having clear objectives was the characteristic that the student teachers in all three groups perceived as being common to both syllabus and curriculum. Scope of information, and time range were perceived by the participants from all groups as the two issues that differentiate syllabus from curriculum. Some of the perceptions are quoted and shown in the excerpts below:

> *For the Similarities*
> Group A: "Both have clear objectives defined."
> Group B: "Both are plans for teaching and learning management."
> Group C: "Both have clear aims to control the teaching and learning'"
>
> *For the Differences*
> Group A: "A curriculum explains general ideas of teaching and learning, while a syllabus explains
>   the information in more specific to the classroom context."
> Group B: "A curriculum defines broader information than a syllabus."
>   "A curriculum is designed by policy planners to be used nationwide,
>   while a syllabus is designed by the teacher who use it in a classroom."
> Group C: "EFL syllabus is designed in accordance with the aims of the curriculum."

Other different ideas were also found. One student from Group B (Group B_4) stated that both curriculum and syllabus were means of strategic planning for teaching and learning. Furthermore, the participants in Group C had more diverse perceptions of the similarities and differences shared in the group discussion, as follows:

> Group C_3:   "Syllabus and curriculum are designed by the government authorities."

Group C_4:   "Syllabus is a resource to develop curriculum, in other words, a curriculum is a building block produced from a syllabus to define a standard of teaching and learning."

4.2   Student teachers' perceptions of the role of language syllabus in EFL teaching and learning

The student teachers' perceptions of the role of the syllabus seemed to be a consequence of their perceptions about what a syllabus is. The student teachers from the three groups perceived the major role of a syllabus as providing a mutual understanding of the course among the teacher and students. Another recurrent phrase in the data set regarding the syllabus role was that of being a "framework of direction" for the teacher to implement, and for the students to understand the significant objectives of the course and to follow the direction. The detailed answers mentioned are as follows:

For learning
Group A: "A syllabus motivates learning because it helps the learners to know the importance and goal of learning."
Group B: "A syllabus prepares students to learn according to the pre-scheduled lessons and content."

For teaching
Group A: "A syllabus helps teachers plan and manage appropriate time for teaching content."
Group B: "A syllabus provides a focus to the teacher to not stray from the course goal."

Similar to their perceptions regarding syllabuses, Group C participants provided quite diverse perceptions about the role of syllabuses. There was one student (Group C_6) who said that syllabuses help learning to be easier, and more understandable. Another (Group C_4) described the role of a syllabus as defining the teaching technique to learners. Overall, the student teachers' perceptions of the role of a syllabus show that they saw a syllabus as being useful for preparing and shaping the activities of teaching and learning. They seemed to agree that the role of a syllabus was similar to a means of classroom regulation that determines the way of teaching and learning to help students achieve specified goals.

5   Discussion

5.1   Student teachers' perceptions of a syllabus and the role of a syllabus

From the focus group discussions, three major perceptions in relation to language syllabus and the role of a syllabus were identified and discussed as follows.

5.1.1   Perceived transmission model of a syllabus

The student teachers' conceptions of a language syllabus coincide with that of the Type A Syllabus (Nunan, 1988), which is explicit and concrete product produced for the students. Although having a concrete direction could facilitate learning, there is a major limitation in this transmission model of the syllabus in that it promotes neither internalization nor deep understanding of the syllabus for both teachers and learners (Richards, 1990). In contrast, Rahimpour (2010) suggests that teachers should regard the syllabus as "open and negotiable" (p. 1663). In Indonesia (Iskandar, 2015), some EFL teachers also commented that they implemented the government reformed curriculum by occasionally adding some revisions to the syllabus to allow for flexibility and adaptability to their learners' needs.

5.1.2   Perceived similarities and differences between syllabus and curriculum

When asked about the differences between syllabus and curriculum, the student teachers seemed to generally understand the differing notions between curriculum and syllabus. This result is not in line with Musingafi, Mhute, Zebron, & Kaseke's (2015) study, which noted that most pre-service

teachers could not distinguish the terms curriculum and syllabus, although they have passed teacher training courses at college. However, they did not mention how the philosophical framework regarding language and language learning underlying the national and school curricula and the course syllabus should be paralleled. Some of the views (e.g. the perception that "the Ministry of Education is one of the main authorities involved in the syllabus designing process") appear to contradict the educational policies of decentralized curriculum and classroom-based syllabus design.

5.1.3 *Perceived course-directing role of a syllabus*

As a consequence of the view of the syllabus as a static product, the student teachers merely saw a syllabus' role as being a tool for directing the processes of teaching and learning, and for motivating students to learn. This viewpoint reinforces that of Grave's (2000) who stated that a syllabus provides a sense of direction to the teacher and students. It also coincides with Hadley's (2000) finding that many teachers like having a fixed syllabus, because "it is logical, organised, and provide a measure of accountability with the school administration" (p. 57). The perception that a syllabus could motivate learning also implies that they think students prefer to know in advance what will be learnt first or later, and what knowledge or skills will be assessed. Most students might prefer knowing in advance about the course content and assessment criteria (Hadley, 2000). Without a clear direction of how and why the course is to be conducted, Griffee (1995) found that the learners were frustrated, refused to participate, and eventually dropped out from the program. However, in my opinion, using a syllabus to strictly manage teaching and learning activities may leave little possibility for flexibility and creativity in classroom teaching.

5.2 *Implications for teacher training: Developing a thorough understanding of a syllabus*

Some major implications were also identified from reflections on the student teachers' perceptions. First, they should be familiarized with the negotiable nature of a syllabus as suggested by Breen & Candlin (1980), as well as features of the task-based syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1992), as part of the negotiable syllabus content. If the syllabus content is partially allowed to be negotiated between the teacher and students, the syllabus will be more meaningful to the students and it could foster learners' intrinsic motivation (Dörnyei, 2001) toward achievement. It may decrease the risk of failure if this type of communicative syllabus is applied in the Thai classroom context, as opposed to a pure negotiable syllabus. Many previous studies also found significant benefits of this type of applied CLT-based syllabus (Green, 1993; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993; Savignon, 1991).

Another implication is that the student teachers should be advised to value more of this significant role of a syllabus as a tool for monitoring, evaluating, and improving the language course. In addition to its course-directing role, a syllabus should be considered as a document for reflection, negotiation, and revision by the teacher and students based on the classroom day-to-day situations. Candlin (1984) also suggests that a syllabus is a tool for expressing the designer's pedagogical ideologies, and for learners to challenge those ideologies.

If these critical roles of a syllabus are realized by the student teachers, it would potentially help them to be able to continually improve themselves as professional language teachers and course designers.

5.3 *Addressing the discrepancy in student teachers' perceptions*

The results also provide evidence, albeit limited, suggesting that there is a discrepancy existing between the perceptions of student teachers from Groups A and B (high to medium rank/urban state universities) and those of Group C (low rank/rural university). While the perceptions of the first two groups were generally parallel with the reformed curriculum policy, the perceptions of the Group C student teachers were mostly deviant. Like other countries that have a disparity between well-resourced urban schools and poorly resourced rural schools (Lamb & Coleman, 2008; Shamim, 2007),

the results point to the potential effect on social inequality as a result of the discrepancy of high-low ranking or urban-rural teacher education program. The present case study suggests that, while most student teachers from groups A and B would become in-service teachers of English at well-resourced urban demonstration schools where their universities have connections, student teachers from Group C tend to be recruited by a rural demonstration school in their hometown that has a connection with University C. In the long term, the discrepancy in the student teachers' background knowledge could be one of the factors that will reinforce the gap in urban-rural standard English teaching in Thailand. To close this gap, the government needs to not only reform EFL education, but also EFL teacher education especially in the universities that produce EFL teachers for poorly resourced urban and rural schools.

6   Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to understand student teachers' perceptions of the language syllabus and the role of the syllabus in language teaching and learning. Generally, the results suggest that their perceptions do not reflect critical conceptions of the syllabus and what it really is used for. Methodologically, this study utilizes a focus group discussion method to reveal student teachers' perceptions, and reflect the knowledge and understanding they should be equipped with in regard to the language syllabus and its role. The results provide significant insights for English education development and teacher education development in Thailand as well as in other contexts where English is taught.

First, based on the findings, it is recommended that EFL teacher education in Thailand should value the significance of the student teachers' perceptions, and be aware that shaping their perceptions is as important as developing their language and teaching skills. Student teachers who are inadequately trained and supported in every language teaching context will certainly have a negative impact on language education at large. The teacher education program should invest much more time and effort in helping student teachers to critically conceptualize the essence of the language syllabus and the basic rationales behind developing and implementing a syllabus. More practice-based instruction could foster them in becoming actively engaged in the teacher training, expose them to innovative ideas of syllabus designs, and equip them with perceptions that are supportive to the reformed curriculum.

Lastly, I would like to emphasize the point that the feasibility and sustainability of any innovative or creative ideas require the active participation of all the key people involved. Student teachers need intrinsic motivation (Dörnyei, 2001) to develop critical perceptions of the syllabus (i.e. to perceive that it could be negotiable and is a tool for course development). Therefore, I suggest that the government should attempt to build motivating conditions that inspire student teachers to create innovative ideas and creative practices. Any conditions that tend to decrease their self-determination to engage in innovation and to cope with challenges should be eliminated. For further research, it would be interesting to study the training activities and materials utilized in the teacher training program of each university, and make some comparisons. Future studies could also conduct a longitudinal study to observe whether EFL teacher training has long-term effects or brings any changes to real classroom teaching.

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Appendix 1

Discussion questions

Examples of the questions relating to syllabus and syllabus role adopted to initiate focus group discussions are as follows:
1) What is an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum?
2) What is an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) syllabus?
3) Describe the similarities and differences between an EFL curriculum and syllabus.
4) What is the role or how is a syllabus significant to language teaching and learning?