Re-conceptualization of Piloting Research in Applied Linguistics
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Abstract
Piloting in Applied Linguistics generally refers to a “dress rehearsal” of the full data collection procedures (e.g., Dörnyei, 2007, p. 75). In this paper, we will argue that the dress rehearsal perspective is restrictive in conceptualizing the nature of conducting pilot studies since numerous decisions have been made prior to the dress rehearsal piloting. These decisions on problematic research design can be informed by small-scale piloting at an earlier stage. Drawing inspiration from the field of Nursing, we propose that such small-scale decision-informing piloting can be used to provide useful input into a problematic research design. The paper, therefore, shows how a different conceptualization of the nature of piloting was implemented in a study on cyber deception by Thai internet users.

Re-conceptualization of Piloting Research in Applied Linguistics
This paper originates in problems encountered while designing into the linguistic and discourse features used by truth-tellers and deceivers in Thai online chat. The problems largely involved key decisions to be made in data collection, and we were especially concerned with having justifiable bases for the decisions. Previous research into the area (e.g., Burns, 1999; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005) provided little guidance since the data collection procedures reported contained few details. We, therefore, turned to the research methodology literature on piloting to see if this could provide a solution to our problems.

Pilot Studies: Applied Linguistics vs. Nursing
Piloting in Applied Linguistics refers to “a dress rehearsal” of the full data collection procedures (Dörnyei, 2007, p.75). This dress rehearsal piloting has been utilized for various purposes such as to try out research instruments such as interview and questionnaire (Burns, 1999; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Robson, 2002), to assess the practicality of data collection procedures (Bryman, 2001; Mackey & Gass, 2005), to identify problems before doing the actual study (Mackey & Gass, 2005), and to enhance validity and reliability of the research instruments (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). This conceptualization, as can be seen in Figure 1, shows that many decisions have been made before the dress rehearsal piloting to ensure that every factor in the study meets the expectations.

Figure 1 Model of Piloting in Applied Linguistics
The dress-rehearsal piloting, however, could not be done since we needed to make decisions on chat program, ethical considerations, and task design before planning the research study. This problematic research design guided us to analyze how different fields of study view pilot studies and what we could apply to our study on cyber deception by Thai internet users. Drawing inspiration from the field of Nursing, the small-scale decision-informing piloting can be defined as “small-scale version(s) done in preparation for the main study” (Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001, p. 467). The small-scale-decision piloting, summarized in Figure 2, can be utilized as a guidance to develop the research plan (Prescott & Soeken, 1989), to provide important data and implications for the main study (Beebe, 2007), to inform sample size requirements and consent (Jacobson & Wood, 2006; Lancaster, Dodd, & Williamson, 2004), to recognize variables affected in the study (Lanphear, 2001), as well as to educate novice researchers about the components of research methods and research procedures (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley, & Graham, 2001).

**Figure 2 Model of Piloting in Nursing Practice**

For our research study, several choices including the chat program, the ethics and the task could be identified by doing small-scale studies. This paper, therefore, provides three examples how the decision-informing piloting can be guidance for designing the experimental of online deception by Thai internet users.

**Case Study 1: Selection of Chat Program**

One of those questions that we needed to answer was which chat program should be used in our experimental study on examining linguistic and discourse features used by truth-tellers and deceivers in Thai online chat. A variety of chat programs, for example, MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Google Talk, QQ Messenger, and ICQ Messenger, are available for the majority of Thai internet users whose age range from 18 to 25 years old. The decision-informing pilot studies were then done to help us make decisions which chat program serves our research purposes: system monitoring, Thai font compatibility, chat log saving, and subjects’ familiarity. The following examples of decision-informing piloting show how the chat program was selected in this study:
Ask a hundred potential subjects to fill-in the questionnaire which chat program they frequently use in online communication. The purpose of conducting the small-scale study was to find out which chat program should be selected in the main study. This questionnaire, as can be seen in Example 1, was randomly distributed to Thai undergraduate students using computer laboratory at King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) in the second semester of academic year 2010.

Example 1

*Chat Program Questionnaire*

Name ……………………………… Family Name ……………………………… Age ……

Please mark the box with X to indicate your answer

1. Which chat program do you frequently use?
   - Google Talk
   - MSN Messenger
   - QQ Messenger
   - Yahoo messenger
   - ICQ messenger
   - Others ………………………………

2. Why do you choose this chat program?
   ……………………………………………………………………………………….

3. Which language do you use in online chat?
   - Thai
   - English

4. How often do you use this chat program?
   - 1-2 days
   - 3-4 days
   - 5-6 days
   - every day

Thank you for your cooperation

Ask a sample of potential subjects to describe their experiences of using this chat program/instant messenger in Thai online communication. This decision-informing piloting attempted to gather information on chatters’ viewpoints, the technical issues, and the practical considerations of using chat program in the actual study. Five voluntary subjects were then individually interviewed after completing the chat program survey. Each interview lasted 10 minutes and was recorded by note-taking. Seven questions used in the pilot study were presented in the following:

a. Have you ever used any chat program/instant messenger? If yes, which chat program do you use the most frequently?

b. How often do you use this chat program/instant messenger in online communication?

c. Is this chat program/instant messenger compatible with Thai language?

d. Do you have any problems when using this chat program/instant messenger? If yes, what are they?

e. What are your reasons for choosing this chat program/instant messenger?

f. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using this chat program/instant messenger in Thai online chat?

g. Do you have any problems with this chat program/instant messenger if you participate in the study on language use in online communication? if yes, what are they?

The results of the survey reveal that 98 percent of subjects frequently used MSN Messenger due to the fact that this chat program has been user-friendly and popular with their friends. For the interview data, the voluntary participants also reported that this chat program could protect user’s privacy and allowed them to create their own emoticons. Consequently,
MSN Messenger was utilized in the trial run of the actual study because of users’ familiarity, Thai font compatibility, and its practicality in the data collection procedures.

**Case Study 2: Considerations on Ethical Issues**

Other key decisions in our deceptive research design were ethical consideration, especially the subjects’ attitudes and the informed consent. The research subjects may be offended by being asked to tell lies while engaging in Thai online chat. The informed consent also needed to focus on how to make it reasonably understandable to the voluntary subjects. The decision-informing pilot studies were then implemented which allowed researchers to gather information on subjects’ feelings when being asked to tell lies in online communication, to develop the consent form, and to gain feedback on the experimental research design. Two examples of decision-informing piloting were as follows:

(3) Individually interview with voluntary samples to gather information about their attitudes towards being asked to tell lies in a synchronous online chat. A primary objective of the decision-informing pilot study was to get a better understanding of the cyber contexts and Thai chatters how truthful they are in online communication. Seven participants studying in the Faculty of Sciences at King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) were asked to report their experiences in Thai online chat. The data collection was done in December of 2010. Each 15-minute interview was recorded by using audio digital recording and note-taking. The list of interview questions used in this study was presented in the following:

- a. How often do you use MSN Messenger in online communication?
- b. Whom do you frequently chat with in MSN Messenger?
- c. Have you ever chatted with a stranger in online communication? if yes, how do you feel?
- d. Do you always provide only truthful information in MSN Messenger? why?
- e. Have you ever told untruthful information in MSN Messenger? if yes, why?
- f. How do you feel when being asked to tell lies in MSN Messenger?
- g. Do you have any problems with participating in this experimental study of online deception? if yes, what are they?
- h. What do you think about participating in the experimental study on cyber deception?
- i. Could you please make any suggestions on this experimental research design?

(4) Ask potential subjects to review the informed consent used in the experimental study on cyber deception by Thai internet users. The purpose of the decision-informing pilot study aimed at examining whether two consent forms (chatter and naïve partner) were comprehensible and suitable for the actual study. Ten university students were divided in two sub-groups. Each group consisting of five members were interviewed to report their attitudes towards the given details, language use, and the comprehensibility of the informed consents. The data collection which lasted 20-30 minutes was done by note-taking. Five interview questions used in the decision-informing piloting were as follows:

- a. Could you please report what the experimental study is about?
- b. Is there anything you don’t understand after reading the informed consent?
- c. What do you think about the format of informed consent?
- d. What do you think about language use and the given details in the consent form?
- e. Do you have any suggestions for the informed consent? If yes, what are they?

The interview data obtained from the decision-informing pilot studies show that the subjects were not concerned about telling lies which seemed to be common in online communication.
The voluntary subjects also reported that they were interested in participating experimental study on cyber deception by Thai internet users. For the informed consents, these subjects suggested adjusting the formality of language use, removing technical terms, and providing the details in two pages. After that, the revised consent forms were utilized in the full-scale study on online deception.

**Case Study 3: Designing the Tasks**

The questions of research design that we also had to consider were, for example, what given instructions should be, how these instructions might influence our data collection procedures, and how the experimental study on cyber deception should be carried out. Previous literature on deception in online communication (e.g., Carlson, George, Burgoon, Adkins, & White, 2004; Zhou, Burgoon, Nunamaker, & Twitchell, 2004) employed the Desert Survival Task, a problem-solving situation which participants were asked to rank twelve survival items (compress kit, book, raincoat, flashlight, vodka, parachute, water, mirror, jackknife, magnetic compass, salt tablets, and air map). The deceivers would convince their partners to change their item ranking.

However, our research study could not duplicate the desert survival study because Thai internet users are not familiar with this situation and may be able to detect that their partners telling lies in online communication. The problems in designing research and give instructions could be solved by conducting the decision-informing piloting, as shown below, which enabled researchers to gather some valuable information on the research operationalization before implementing the main research study.

(5) Try out different instructions and find out how these could result in the data collection and how the subjects follow the given instructions in online communication. Three instructions used in the decision-informing pilot studies were:

- **a. Pretend to be someone else in online communication**
- **b. Provide only untruthful information in online communication**
- **c. Convince your chat partner that you are someone else in online communication**

Six university students were randomly paired up and participate in the study of language use in Thai online chat. Three of them were assigned to be chatter and had to follow one of the given instruction. The others were naïve partner engaging in Thai online chat. The decision-informing pilot studies show that subjects, who were instructed pretending to be someone else and providing untruthful information, told fantasy story in online communication. As a consequence, these chatters could be immediately detected that they were lying in Thai online chat. Unlike the instructions convincing your chat partner that you are someone else in online communication, the chatter then told lies based on his/her familiar background. Their feedback on designing tasks allowed researchers to gain the examples of linguistic and discourse features used by truth-tellers and deceivers in Thai online chat and how these data were influenced by the experimental research design.

**Decision-Informing Piloting: Lessons Learned from the Field of Nursing**

The nature of dress rehearsal piloting in Applied Linguistics seems to be restrictive and could not provide solutions for our problematic research design on cyber deception. Learning from the field of Nursing allowed us to re-conceptualize pilot studies and to deal with the difficulties of making decisions such as the chat program, ethical considerations, and the task design. Although the decision-informing piloting that we have done was limited by small sample size and weak design, it could provide a primary information analysis of the actual study. The
benefits of decision-informing piloting can be summarized as follows: training novice researchers to understand researcher procedures, developing a research plan, identifying problems caused by the proposed research methods, and assessing the practicality of the main study (Beebe, 2007; Jacobson & Wood, 2006; Lanphear, 2001; Nyatanga, 2005; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2004; Van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley, & Graham, 2001). By contrast, the results of decision-informing piloting could not guarantee that the actual study would be successful (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2004). Researcher should also aware of time-consuming procedures and difficulties in getting pilot studies published (Donna, 2009; Nyatanga, 2005; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2004).

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References

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