

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Background

The globalisation era accounts for the widespread transmission of information. A tangible example of this phenomenon is the Internet, on which English language is mostly used as a medium of communication. We can not deny that nowadays the young generations are more exposed to English since various forms of entertainment, easily consumed by the young, are also freely transmitted. A way to bridge those entertaining forms from different countries is to at least communicate in an international language. English names or words are, therefore, added to films, songs, TV shows, etc. As for education, teachers, too, encourage students to be accustomed to other forms of knowledge in the world. English usage is definitely inevitable for them to search for the information in different cultures. Though some versions translated in students' first language may be available, the easy access to primary sources via many kinds of media is tempting for them to try the usage by themselves. Another practicality of English as an international language falls under business. The applicants' English proficiency is used to select short-listed candidates because the executives see the significance of the language in this current situation (Chinokul, 2003 : 44). A local company also has to be aware of an effect of disaster on the other side of the world, for instance. The information free flowing to its employees who are good at English may award the company with handsome benefits, let alone the far-more benefit for an international company with this competent personnel.

Since English has become an important language in the globalisation period, many countries have planned to prepare their people to use it in order to gain the most benefits in all fields. Among these countries is Thailand, which attempts to educate its young learning on the utilisation of the language. According to the 2008 Core Curriculum by Office of Academic and Education Standards, both elementary and secondary curriculums build up foundations of the four skills of English (Commission on Basic Education, 2009 : 252). Each skill is to be taught to learners so as (1) to communicate with others; (2) to acknowledge differences in cultures; (3) to link knowledge with other learning areas; and (4) to use the target language for exploring 'further education, livelihood and exchange of learning with the global society' (p. 253). The tertiary education, then, should echo the aim by providing more advanced comprehension of the target language so that the graduates are ready for their professions in the real world. However, achievement does not come easy. Many studies report on failures in students' ability in using English after completing the whole sixteen year programme. Some try to find ways to eliminate the troubles and develop their curriculum for the better

teaching and learning the language. I, as an lecturer in a university, propose a study which may help bring about English students' satisfaction and accomplishment. Writing is the skill on which I focus. According to employers, English competence is also one of the indicators for successful candidates. Therefore, it is important to figure out students' English ability and ways to improve it if the findings show dissatisfactory results (Chalaysap, 2005 : 3; Kumkao, 2004 : 13; Vessakosol, 2001 : 162).

The rationale of prioritising writing skills includes their being a communicative tool to the real world. Some may argue that teaching students to write an essay contradicts the aim of the 2008 core curriculum: to enable students to communicate by using the target language for daily life situations and so on. In fact, by writing an essay, students learn to communicate in another form which is the written form. Smith & Dale (1976 : 17) argue that 'writing is important because it bridges the message sender or the writer to the outside world. Whereas speaking needs a conversant, readers can be found everywhere. The print media is much more affordable than cassettes or radios. Other than that, writing helps speaking skills' (as cited in Kumkao, 2004 : 13). Writing tasks, therefore, help students learn a way to communicate with others. The process writing, on which this study focuses as its teaching method, also enables students to understand how the learning of writing works out because they have to write and revise their tasks until they can communicate in this form well. This foundation activity will lead students to other complex ones, such as writing journals, compiling portfolios and completing projects, which requires the use of other skills. For example, there will be the communication between students and teachers or between students and other sources, from which they can gain information, to finish their projects.

There is a question whether or not only one skill should be emphasised in a class. Chinokul (2003 : 48) points out that one of the English teaching processes should focus on integrating all the four skills and integrating other fields of knowledge. During each class, all of the four skills have been integrated to some extent. Though a lesson plan focuses on listening skills, students have to read instructions, speak to respond and write their answers. However, by not emphasising each skill, in my point of view, students may not be able to use English fluently. This claim is supported by a study. It found that all of the four English skills correlated at a .001 level of significance (Chalaysap, 2005 : 17). In other words, the grade of a skill can affect the grade of the others. Again, since writing skills are productive skills, students are required to integrate the language units they have received from listening and reading to generate the language in a rather formal form.

As for Thailand, most Thai students perform poorly in English writing skills, claimed to be the necessary ones for tertiary education (Chinawong, 2000 : 9). Moreover, Meejang (2000 : 82) concludes Thai students' problems in writing from other studies as shown below:

“- The first study shows first-year students from a state university could not write English very well because of their poor grammar and word choice.

- The second study reports low competence in writing skills, of first-year students from Chulalongkorn University. They had problems with organization, punctuation and structures.

- The third study found that fifty Thammasart University students wrote well in the sentential level but failed to portray meanings in the paragraph level.

- The final study reported the two problems of undergraduates' writing included (1) structural level, including sentences, clauses, phrases and words and (2) syntactic level, including non-parallel structures, incomplete message within a sentence and transition markers.”

There are two main causes for this: the lessons and tests which mostly focus on multiple choices and students' low English competence. A solution is to have students keep practicing writing in the class. This falls under the basic feature of the process writing—the method, to which this study will ask students' opinion. According to a study, though the 35 students majoring English from a state university performed rather well in their business English writing, their academic writing showed poor performance in generating ideas and content. Vessakosol (2001 : 175 – 176), therefore, concludes that students lack critical thinking skills to create reasons to support their idea. One way to solve this problem is to implement the process writing approach which helps elicit students' idea as its very first step.

According to a number of state universities' journals in the past ten years, many studies focus on the analyses of students' output rather than the creation of students' input. For example, the error analyses have been conducted in order to find the most frequent grammatical mistakes students made in their writing (Kaourai, 2003; Pongpairoj, 2002; Thongrin, 2001). The utilisation of the results falls mostly on the emphasis of forms and structures to be taught to students. However, the fact that forms are more focused than the content hinders students from improving the skills (Tessema, 2005; Vessakosol, 2001). I, definitely, agree with teaching students how to generate ideas for writing so that their content reads smoothly. Then forms can be revised in the later step of process writing. It should not be the core of the lesson; otherwise, students may have more stress.

There are also many studies that aim to assess students' English proficiency which indirectly suggest the need for improving the teaching method. Some of them also focused on one aspect of writing skills, such as an error analysis of writing (Chinawong, 2000; Meejang, 2000; Thongrin, 2001; Vessakosol, 2001; Pongpairoj, 2002; Chalaysap, 2005). Again, it is rare to find a study which focuses on the teaching method for writing skills, especially for tertiary education. In particular, a study which not only analysed an aspect or

assessed students' proficiency, but provided a way to find out students' preferred means of how they wanted to be taught in order to improve their English skills.

In the faculty of Education, Silpakorn University, the foundation English courses for the first year students consist of the English I and II courses, the first taught in Term 1 and the other in Term 2. They are expected to lead students to use all of the English skills to communicate effectively. However, I have found that among the four skills, writing and speaking are viewed by most learners as the most difficult because they are productive skills. This difficulty is caused by the fact that students have to produce the language by themselves. They are usually reluctant to verbalise when asked for responses. Due to time constraints and students' average competence, only a few speaking activities can be done in classes, often used as a tool to communicate instructions to students. As for writing skills, students find writing assignments hard as well. Nevertheless, they can spend extra time outside the classroom to complete the tasks. It is also much easier for class teachers to give feedback and help the students improve these skills.

Unfortunately, none of the textbooks used during the past years in the Faculty of Education provided writing assignments practical and simple enough to build students' communicative proficiency. Therefore, only in the academic year 2007 did the teachers start designing writing exercises as standardised material for all the English I and II teachers. Some of them were adapted from a textbook named *Explorations* (Lee, 2000) while the others were compiled by the teaching team. Most exercises asked students to express their own experience by writing paragraphs on selected topics. We believe that it is easier for learners to use their own input when they have to produce the tasks in their foreign language. The writing tasks included four assignments, all of which had the same format: beginning with a reading passage and an exercise for researching ideas; directions for an assignment coupled with a cluster diagram or guided questions for organising ideas; and steps for assessing and editing. Since then, writing exercises have been improved all along. The latest version was used in the 2010 academic year when a new text book *Touchstone 3* (McCarthy et al., 2009) was introduced. All exercises on the writing assignment handouts were designed in line with the application of the process writing, which consisted of five steps: reading to gather ideas, outlining to organise ideas, drafting, revising and editing. For the first step, students were asked to read a passage from the textbook in hope that they would be able to gather ideas for what they were about to write. The second step demanded students to organise the ideas from the reading texts and their own. In this step, there were a number of questions put into paragraphs to help students see how their ideas could be generated and put in order. Class teachers applied the communicative approach in reading to teach students for the first step and then facilitated students as needed at the second step. Students' answers to the questions, therefore, became useful information for the third step. Spending their pastime out of class, students tried to complete the first drafts by

themselves and submitted them to class teachers. Deadlines for all steps were usually designated in each course' syllabus so that all students had the same amount of time to complete each step. The next step was revising. Teachers would mark students' papers and gave feedback, which would be reviewed by students during class time or some might spend other times revise their drafts. The second draft would be submitted to class teachers again for another round of feedback. Finally, the last step was editing, where students reviewed their class teachers' feedbacks and made changes to their final drafts.

Since marks for the writing were minimal, 5 percentage points for all criteria, a pre/post-study to measure students' improvement would be insignificant. But a study to gauge students' opinion towards the material and the instruction would be beneficial for both the learners and the instructors. The results of this research would not only reflect the appropriateness and success of the instruction, but it would also investigate which teaching methods students preferred. Other than that, the results of the study would figure out how the writing lesson would be taught in the new course syllabi as mentioned in its committee meeting (2010, September). Silpakorn University has imposed a new scheme to standardise its foundation courses for all subjects. The plan was commenced in the 2010 academic year. Several meetings had been set up. Until September, the English Foundation Committee, which consisted of English teachers from all faculties, presented the draft of the new English foundation courses in replacement for the English I and II courses taught in the 2010 academic year. In the new syllabi, the writing skills are focused in both courses: English for Everyday Use and English Skills Development. In both courses, students are hoped to be able to gather information from listening to or reading texts before starting to write to reflect their ideas. This seems to be the first step of the process writing. Some may argue that the results of this study might be of no use since the new syllabi was already introduced. The method of teaching, however, would depend on each faculty's teaching team. The results of this study could be applied in the faculties of Education and Engineering. Though the central method—the process writing—was imposed by the committee, other elements, such as the material, the way to give feedback, timing and grading criteria, needed to be detailed. Writing lessons would be instructed by any class teachers with the same method of teaching. The standard of teaching foundation courses would meet the university's scheme, accordingly.

As mentioned in the very first paragraph, the foundation courses try to bridge the gap between knowledge taught in classrooms and the application in the real world, and this study would pave the way for that. As a result, students' real needs would be discovered and appropriate ways of teaching would be explored. Hopefully, a modified version of writing material based on students' own contributions would make the English foundation courses rewarding ones.

## **2. Statements of the problem**

2.1 Did the students who took English I and English II courses in the terms 1/2010 and 2/2010 have positive or negative opinion towards the writing instruction?

2.2 Were there any other factors that affect the students' opinion towards the writing instruction?

2.3 What were the students' favourite teaching methods for writing skills?

## **3. Objectives of the study**

3.1 To study the students' opinion towards the instruction in writing English in English foundation courses.

3.2 To study the students' preferred teaching methods for the instruction in writing English.

3.3 To compare the demographic data of SU first year students with their opinion towards the instruction in writing English in English foundation courses.

## **4. Hypothesis of the study**

4.1 The students have positive opinion towards the instruction in writing English in English foundation courses.

4.2 The students, however, have negative opinion towards learning the writing skills.

4.3 Students prefer their teachers' use of grammar-translation approach in teaching writing skills.

4.4 Students' opinion on the instruction in writing English in English foundation courses relates to their demographic data: English I and II grades in the terms 1/2010 and 2/2010; faculties and majors; experience in English-speaking countries; years of learning English; and learning in special tutorial classes.

## **5. Scope of the study**

5.1 *Population*: 1,803 students who already took the English I course and were about to complete the English II course in the 2010 academic year. These students were from the two faculties 'Education' and 'Engineering and Industrial Technology', at Silpakorn University located at Sanam Chandra Palace campus.

5.2 *Samples*: 451 students from the two faculties who were selected by the simple random sampling technique. However, only 444 questionnaires were returned and analysed.

5.3 *Variables*: The instruction in writing English in English foundation courses was an independent variable. The opinion on the instruction in writing English in English foundation courses was a dependent variable.

## 6. Assumption of the study

The researcher's aim was that the samples were to reveal their actual opinion on the instruction in writing English in English foundation courses. Using the same material, different class teachers would teach with slightly different styles; however, the instruction in writing English in both courses was limited to the process writing. The instruction adapted for the material, therefore, was assumed to be the same. Hence, it became an independent variable.

The material consisted of a reading passage, questions for generating ideas and forming an outline, and the directions for completing a writing task. Both class teachers and students were expected to follow the process. The detailed criteria was also elaborated in the material so that the instruction in writing English in the English I and II courses conducted by all teachers was identical to some extent.

## 7. Definitions of the terms

'*Opinion on the instruction in writing English*' refers to the opinions and feelings that the students had about the writing material and the writing process applied in the English I and English II courses in the terms 1/2010 and 2/2010.

'*The material*' refers to the handouts designed by the teaching team at the TEFL section, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, the Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University located at Sanam Chandra Palace campus, Nakorn Pathom.

'*Engineering students*' means the students, from Faculty of Engineering and Industrial Technology of Silpakorn University at the Sanam Chandra Palace campus, who had enrolled and passed the English I course and were about to complete the English II course.

'*Education students*' means the students, from Faculty of Education of Silpakorn University at the Sanam Chandra Palace campus, who had enrolled and passed the English I course and were about to complete the English II course.

'*Demographic data*' includes age; gender; English I grade in the term 1/2010; faculties (Engineering or Education) and majors; experience in English-speaking countries; years of learning English; and learning in special tutorial classes.

'*Instruction in writing English*' refers to writing material designed by the lecturers of the Teaching Foreign Languages Section in the Curriculum and Instruction Department, Faculty of Education. This term also includes all of the exercises on the material and the teaching method used with the material.

'*English foundation courses*' are the English I and II courses with 080 177 and 080 188 as their code numbers.

## **8. Significance of the study**

The results of the study would benefit both the teachers and the learners. The teachers would be able to redesign material for writing tasks which would be more interesting and meaningful to the learners. Some composition approaches were presented in this study's instruments, all of which were selected to represent the teaching methods which aimed to meet students' needs. Any approach that received the most positive feedback would be used in the English I and II classes in the following academic year. With the right approach, the learners might feel that their needs are fulfilled. With newly modified material and instruction, the researcher anticipates that there would be greater motivation and rapport during writing activities. Finally, the students would realise the usefulness of the writing skills taught in the foundation courses.

## **9. Organisation of the report**

The report of this study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the introduction. Chapter 2 includes the general background on teaching writing as a foreign language, the process writing and related studies. Chapter 3 deals with the methods on which this study was based, data collection and interpretation methodologies. The chapter describes procedures, research samples, instruments, construction of instruments, data collection and data analysis.

Chapter 4 deals with the analysis of data collected from the instrument, which gives the general background of the samples, opinion on the method of teaching English writing and students' preferred method of teaching English writing. Finally, Chapter 5 gives conclusions of the study, a discussion and recommendations for further research.