

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

English might not be the most widely spoken language in the world, especially in terms of number of native speakers, but it is the world's most prominent language. According to English as a Spoken Language statistics, it has been estimated that out of the, roughly, 6 billion people throughout the world about 450 million speak English. English is the ideal language for many governments around the world, and it is also prominent in business, education, world news, and communication. There are a number of powerful tools that have allowed more people to learn English than ever, one of which is using English as medium of instruction in education. In Thailand, a number of international institutions and programs have been established to achieve this goal. At present, both public and private universities in Thailand offer, altogether, 425 international programs using English as the medium of instruction at both undergraduate and graduate levels (MOE, 2003-2004). Most of the programs have a high number of students who do not use English as their native language.

Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) is one of the region's largest international graduate institutions offering higher degrees to students from around the world. It has 2,000 graduate students from more than 40 countries and territories and 130 world class faculty members from more than 20 countries. AIT, offer an excellent opportunity for multinational and multi- cultural interaction.

In all international programs, English is used as medium for instruction. Both understanding and communicating in English can have a direct influence on academic achievements. The communication of and learning of a second language, which in this case is English, is an arduous task which requires a lot of effort. However, no sufficient studies have been done on the effect of certain factors (such as aptitude, personality, motivation, attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs, age) on learning English language.

The study is intended to evaluate the comparative importance of various factors on non-native English Speaking students acquiring English proficiency with focus on importance of attitude, motivation and exposure to English in terms of learning environment. The English proficiency level of each respondent will be evaluated quantitatively by two standardize test scores organized by the Language Center of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT).

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In an international academic environment, a better interpersonal attitude results in higher improvement in acquiring English proficiency. An English placement test, English Interviewee Test (EIT), a mandatory test organized by Language Center of AIT and Academic Writing Placement Test (AWPT), organized after the intensive English course(s), for student who performed poorly in the EIT, will be used as the tool for evaluating improvement in English proficiency for non-native English speaking students.

The hypotheses used in the study are:

- A positive attitude towards English language would improve the English proficiency of non-native English speaking students.
- Good motivation towards English language would improve the English proficiency of non-native English speaking students.
- A high chance for exposure to English would improve the English proficiency of non-native English speaking students.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.3.1 To study the role of attitude as an internal factor that affects the English proficiency of non-native English speaking students at AIT

1.3.2 To study the role of motivation as an internal factor that affects the English proficiency of non-native English speaking students at AIT

1.3.3 To study the exposure to English in terms of learning environment at AIT as an external factor that affects the English proficiency of non-native English speaking students at AIT

1.3.4 To investigate the students' opinions on being proficient in English.

1.3.5 To understand the relationship among the respondents' English proficiency towards factors on attitude, motivation and exposure to English.

1.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researcher selected only second year graduate students enrolled in the Master Degree Program in the School of Environment, Resources and Development (SERD) as the samples for this research due to the following main reasons:

- Budget and time were personal limitations of the researcher.
- There would have been greater diversity in terms of their educational background, if the research study had been conducted on students from all three Schools of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT).
- All AIT students in degree programs must attain a passing grade of 'C' or higher for the course EL19: Academic and Technical Writing; otherwise, they will not be allowed to graduate. Therefore, students from the master program requiring a two-year-duration were selected as the samples for this research to maintain a balance in the student groups in terms of years of study.

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study will focus on the effect of Social-Psychological factors; Motivation, Attitude; and Exposure to English in terms of the learning environment at AIT relating to acquiring English proficiency as a language for communication by non-native English speaking students, irrespective of their nationalities and ages.

Two different standardized English test scores, organized by the Language Center of AIT, of 207 non-native English speaking students from field of studies under SERD, were collected through the Language Center. The respondents will be asked to complete the questionnaire to evaluate their English proficiency and to attain their point of views relating to academic environment at AIT that could encourage improvement of their English proficiency. This result will be statistically analyzed using Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis.

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The definition of the terms of this study are as follows:

English proficiency refers to the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language. Proficient speakers demonstrate both accuracy and fluency, and use a variety of communication strategies in language.

AIT Non-native English Speaking student refers to the group of students studying in different social and technical programs at Master Degree level whose native language or mother tongue is not English, and need to use a certain level of effort to acquire proficiency in English as a Second language.

The Language Center offers a range intensive language and academic preparation programs for students preparing for study at AIT. The programs are intended to ensure that prospective students learn to use English for their own educational purposes while improving their competencies in the language. Regular courses are offered every semester and during term breaks.

AIT English Interviewee Test (AIT-EIT) refers to an in-house test of English proficiency. This test is called the AIT English Interviewee Test or **AIT-EIT**, as it is regularly taken by applicants who come to campus for an interview with a member of faculty; however, anyone interested can take the test before or after they apply. It is scored on a scale similar to IELTS, so a writing score of 4.5 is acceptable for admission to AIT. The **AIT-EIT** is a 90-minute test, which consists of three parts (Listening, English Structure and Essay Writing). Scaling pattern and further details of AWPT are presented in Chapter 2.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study can provide an excellent insight on the factors that play an important role in acquiring English skills. One of the main goals of international program is to create competent graduate students who can communicate proficiently in English language. This research will provide an insight about the interpersonal skills of respondents and their perspective of the learning environment. The study can be utilized to develop an approach to teach English which might differ from individual to individual as well as fixing any loopholes in the learning environment, if there any.

1.8 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

A Study of Factors Affecting the English Proficiency of Non-Native English Speaking Students at the School of Environment, Resources and Development, Asian Institute of Technology is divided into 5 chapters.

Chapter 1 consists of the background of the study, statement of the problems, objectives of the study and definitions of terms. Also, the significance and organization of this study as well as the limitations of the research are included in this chapter.

Chapter 2 comprises a review of literature relevant to this study. There are five main issues discussed in the review of literature. The first issue is about the importance of English as Communication Language. The second issue provides some theories regarding the motivation in learning English. The third issue deals with relevant research on attitudes in learning English. The fourth issue deals with some studies on exposure to English. Lastly, the fifth issue provides some related studies on English proficiency.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of this study which includes the population and sampling, instruments, data collection method and data analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the information of the findings collected from the questionnaires.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study as well as the discussion of the findings.