

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

English, a Lingua-franca for many centuries, has proven to be the most effective language to communicate with people around the world. In Thailand, there are growing numbers of English speakers, especially among the youth. One reason for the growth of English speakers in Thailand is that the government has included the teaching and learning of English language in the school curriculum. Another is the influence of western culture, especially the British and the American cultures, which have been indirectly pushing the people to speak more and more English. Moreover, foreign investors from western countries and tourists have had great impact on the attitude of learning the English language among Thai people.

International schools have also shot up like mushrooms in the past ten years as the demand of the Thai parents have increased. There are now hundreds of schools which offer international education to students, starting from early years up to high school.

Initially learning of the English language in Thailand was focused mainly on the grammar and form. However, it was found that the students' achievement on all the four skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, was low (Changchit, 1986). Later, a communicative approach was used to teach the students to be able to communicate rather than knowing only grammar and forms. As mentioned by Hymes (1972), if the 'rules of use' are not learnt, grammar and form will not help in a successful communication.

However, today it is realized that reading is another very important aspect of learning English in order to build sufficient background knowledge. According to Slavin (1996), no matter what philosophy one prefers, most educators seem to agree that literacy is one of the most important skills a student can apply to functional living in the society. Research in reading has indicated that children who read well have a very high probability of successfully achieving in school (Slavin, 1989, 1991,

1996;Slavin, Madden, Dolan, Wasik, Ross, & Smith, 1994).

Reading can be taught in many ways and styles. The teaching of reading to first language learners and second language learners has now become different. In the past, Thai schools taught English reading and spelling through memorization of vocabulary. As a result, the students ended up having problems reading and spelling new words that they encountered out of the classroom. Now, the practice of phonics, which teaches the students how to spell, is helping the development of reading skills among young children.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since comprehension is the main aim for teaching reading, the students are taught through a phonics approach which seems to be the basics of teaching the students how to sound out each individual letters and then join them together to form a word that contributes to a meaningful text. However, from the test results taken at the end of every semester, there are still some students who cannot spell, and face difficulties in reading or identifying the words taught. This could be because of the irregular sounds of some of the words, which cannot be sounded out through phonics and need to be memorized instead. Therefore, this case study will try to find out better alternatives in teaching young children how to spell and read.

1.2.1 Why do these EFL students have difficulties in decoding the letters into sounds?

1.2.2 What is the appropriate approach in teaching these EFL students how to spell and read accurately and fluently?

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purposes of this study are:

1.3.1 To identify the differences of the approach between phonics and word recognition.

1.3.2 To compare and evaluate the students spelling ability when taught

reading and spelling through phonics and word recognition.

1.3.3 To investigate if the word recognition method of teaching is effective and should be included in the school curriculum.

1.4 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The definitions of the terms of this study are the following:

Phonics approach: refers to a system of instruction that helps children develop an understanding that the letters and letter patterns of written language represent the sound of spoken language.

Word Recognition: refers to the ability to associate a printed word with its meaning or simply to decode the words without having to sound the words out letter-by-letter.

Phonemic awareness: is the understanding of how each letter has its own sound.

EFL students: refers to Thai students learning English as a foreign language.

L1: is the abbreviation of first language, mother tongue or native language. It is a language which is learnt from birth.

L2: is the abbreviation of second language. It is any language which a speaker uses other than the first language.

1.5 BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

1.5.1 This study assumes that the students taught through the method of phonics may get higher test scores than the students taught through word recognition due to some prior background knowledge of phonics.

1.5.2 This study assumes that the students taught through phonics will have better spelling skills and will be able to recall the spellings after a period of time.

1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1.6.1 The study aims at comparing the students' spelling ability in English and in the lessons taught only.

1.6.2 The subjects in this study are chosen from 20 Kindergarten-3 students who are Thais and have been studying in an International school for at least 1 year.

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1.7.1 During data collection, some students may not pay attention to the questions and as a consequence it may have an effect on the validity of the test score and results.

1.7.2 Dealing with young students, sometimes they may not be motivated to answer the questions which may affect the result.

1.7.3 The findings can only be relevant to EFL students from the International Montessori Center.

1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1.8.1 This study will investigate the effectiveness of using phonics in teaching young children how to read at the International Montessori Center.

1.8.2 This study will investigate the differences of the outcome in using both phonics and word recognition in teaching young children how to spell.

1.8.3 To weigh whether Word Recognition is beneficial to include in the school curriculum in order to fit different learning styles of the students.

1.9 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The study contains the following:

1.9.1 Chapter 1 contains the introduction, rationale, purposes of the study, hypotheses, scope and limitations of the study, basic assumptions, definitions of terms and significance of the study.

1.9.2 Chapter 2 deals with the review of literature related to both the phonics and word recognition approach.

1.9.3 Chapter 3 gives information about the subjects, the instruments, the procedure of the study, and the collection of the analysis of the data.

1.9.4 Chapter 4 analyses the results through evaluation of test scores.

1.9.5 Chapter 5 contains the summary, discussion of the findings and the implications of the study, including recommendations for further study.