

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presented information which was relevant to the conditions of the study, its rationale and its background to enable the reader to grasp the subject matter. The chapter aimed to clarify the purposes of the study, what goals were set, the research questions, and the research hypothesis. Thereafter, this chapter explained the scope of the study, definitions of the terminology employed in this study, and the last part clarified significance of this study.

Rationale and background of the study

In accordance with the Constitution of 1997 and the Education Act of 1999, Thailand has reformed educational practices (Ministry of Education, 1999: 25) in order to further develop human resources. One of the major goals has been to construct a knowledge-based economy and society (Ministry of Education, 2008: 1-2) in which Thai people can adapt themselves to ever changing world economy and social trends. (National Economics and Social Development Board, 2006: 7-8). In order to implement this, the Education Act aims to increase the intellectual achievements of the population and, as a result, enable people to lead a happy and self reliant life while adapting to the changes within society and, more importantly, in the world economy.

English as a language has been identified to be an important part of this implementation. The study and understanding of English is one of the most important tools Thai society needs in order to acquire knowledge, gain access to current events, pursue higher education and conduct business within the global arena (Ministry of Education, 2008: 1-2).

In 2004, the Office of the Education Council reported that, with an understanding of English, Thai people will be able to understand cultural and political differences, take

part in the global economy and broaden their perspective of the world. They will be able to communicate with foreigners confidently, have a positive attitude towards foreign languages and cultures and be in a better position to pass on Thai identity and culture to the rest of the world.

In the last thirty years or so, the internet has completely changed people's perspective of communication and now, with sites such as Facebook, Hi5 and Twitter, as well as email and chat sites, people have the ability to communicate on an unprecedented global scale (Ministry of Education, 2008: 1-5). Although the majority of internet communication is conducted in English (Crystal, 2003: 2-14), the real goal of the Office of Education in Thailand is to achieve understanding and competence in verbal: face to face communication.

In order to achieve this goal, the Thai education curriculum has been constantly altered in attempts to enhance student learning ability. Multimedia has been introduced, as well as new teaching techniques that have proved successful in other parts of the world. However, despite these changes, and the fact that they have been learning English for many years, Thai students continue to struggle when communicating with foreigners (Yenprasert, 2007: 4). According to the Ordinary National Educational figures, student speaking skills were consistently substandard and their average scores were never more than fifty percent of the total. As a prime example the average score of Mattayomsuksa 6 students attending Nongbuapittayakarn School was as low as 20.98 percent of the total in 2009 (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2009: 3).

English as a foreign language has been taught for decades in Thailand. All students are expected to learn English in primary and secondary education (Ministry of Education, 2008: 1). The National Curriculum includes English as the basis for student ability in using a foreign language as a form of communication in accordance with the aim of the Basic Education Curriculum of 2001. The study of English has been categorized into two distinct levels: Primary education grade 1 to Secondary grade 3 and Secondary education grade 4 to 6 (Ministry of Education, 2008: 8). Within each of these levels are four main skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these skills, speaking is the

most popular and effective method of learning since the speaker encounters the listener directly (Nunan, 1999: 9–16). Speaking enables direct and clear understanding, as well as enhancing listening and communication skills. However, Thai students have rarely been able to participate in any meaningful conversation (Brown, 2006: 180). The speaking skill of Thai students has not increased despite the introduction of new techniques and methods introduced over the years. In 2009, the Ministry of Education identified some of the problems Thai students face when trying to learn English.

First was a lack of knowledge on the part of the teacher. Many teachers were found to be unqualified (Mackenzie, 2002: 62) when it came to teaching a foreign language and, in fact, many of those teachers did not have the necessary ability to speak the target language coherently. Pronunciation was identified as being a major problem (Harmer, 2005: 184-186) and many students did not have errors corrected due to the inability of the teacher to recognize the mispronunciation. Problems with pronunciation stemmed from the interference of their native language (Lush, 2002: 75-82) and were accepted within the classroom as being a normal part of the English language. A typical example of this is the use of the word 'how' for 'house'. It was also discovered that students failed to be able to communicate with native English speakers when the opportunity to do so arose and that English was seldom used as a part of their normal daily lives (Brown, 2006: 181).

The next problem identified as having a disruptive influence on learning was the size of the typical Thai classroom. It was determined that a number of students in a class was excessive (Khanarat & Normura, 2008: 98). On average a normal English language class contained 45 to 50 students with some exceeding 50. With only one teacher it was found to be impossible for all of the students to have an opportunity to speak and they seldom achieved the goal of the lesson (Harmer, 2005: 116-117). Even division of the class into groups was found to be problematic and a one hour lesson could easily be taken up with organization of the groups rather than learning. Very little in the way of group interaction took place (Harmer, 2005: 115-116).

Even in those classes where the opportunity to speak did present itself, very few Thai teachers allowed it due to their own lack of confidence when speaking English. They lacked willingness to speak due to a culturally-based norm Thai culture which does not allow for a student to question a teacher, or for a teacher to be embarrassed by a question from a student. Anxiety, and fear of loss of face, contributed to the lack of English spoken within the classroom. Teaching methodologies in most classes were found to be teacher-centered (Brown, 2006: 181). The ability to build confidence and motivate students was rarely found among Thai teachers (Mackenzie, 2002: 5).

The majority of teachers taught English in the traditional manner, using grammar and translation methods, and used books which had not been evaluated or were irrelevant to the syllabus. The teachers did not examine the contents of the text books in order to determine whether the contents matched the learning style of the students and rarely, if ever, altered the contents to suit the needs of the students (Khanarat & Normura, 2008: 100). Tests and examinations did not follow what had been taught in the classroom and the tests designed to go with the text books were never used. The tests themselves, were often grammatically incorrect or written in such a poor manner as to be indecipherable by the students. Communicative activities within the text books were ignored by the teachers and, in any event, were unfamiliar as they had never been taught how to use them (Yenprasert, 2007: 4).

Finally, Thai teachers had not been given adequate training to be able to teach speaking skills and, in some cases, lacked the ability to communicate effectively in English. Schools were short of modern materials and did not offer the students any reasons to use the target language outside the classroom (Khanarat & Normura, 2008: 94).

For the above reasons, the researcher would like to improve students' English speaking proficiency using communicative tasks. Various theories and research studies have considered communicative tasks as interesting activities to help students perform their speaking through interaction. According to Pica, Kanagy & Falodun (1993: 9-34), a typology of the five communicative tasks: Jigsaw, Information-gap, Decision-making,

Problem-solving, and Opinion-exchange are considered the most important tools to assist students in promoting speaking proficiency. The students will be required to work in pairs or groups, sharing the ideas and opinions, and negotiating the meanings through interaction. Besides, communicative tasks were successfully applied in developing teaching materials or adjusting curriculum design (Wang, 2006: 81). Therefore, the researcher aims to employ these tasks with Mathayomsuksa 6 students in Nongbuapittayakarn School to assess whether the tasks could assist their oral communication in the language classroom and the students have good attitude towards them. In addition, the tasks might make a greater contribution to students' ability to communicate in real-life situations than current conditions in English language classes.

Research questions

When employing the five communicative tasks into the English listening and speaking course of Mattayomsuksa 6 in Nongbuapittayakarn School, the following research questions arise:

1. Which communicative task is most effective in improving students' English speaking proficiency?
2. Are there any differences between the pretest and posttest English speaking proficiency scores for each communicative task?
3. What were the student attitudes towards the five communicative tasks?

Purposes of the study

The purposes of this study are:

1. To examine the effectiveness of the five communicative tasks in improving the English speaking proficiency of Mattayomsuksa 6 students in Nongbuapittayakarn School with the standard criteria 80 / 80.

2. To compare the differences between the English speaking proficiency results for each communicative task.

3. To investigate the students' attitudes towards the five communicative tasks.

Hypothesis

The five communicative tasks can improve English speaking proficiency of Mattayomsuksa 6 students at different levels.

Scope of the study

This study focused on the five types of communicative tasks including Jigsaw, Information-gap, Problem-solving, Decision-making and Opinion-exchange and the comparison which task was the most effective in contributing to students' English speaking proficiency.

The research was conducted in the second semester of 2010:

1. Population and the sample

1.1 Population was 64 students who enrolled in the English listening and speaking course in Nongbuapittayakarn School.

1.2 The sample was 25 students of Mattayomsuksa 6/9 who enrolled in the English listening and speaking course in Nongbuapittayakarn School using purposive selection.

2. Variables

2.1 Independent variable was teaching speaking using the five communicative tasks: Jigsaw, Information-gap, Decision-making, Problem-solving, and Opinion-exchange.

2.2 Dependent variable

The dependent variables were:

2.2.1 The students' English speaking proficiency

2.2.2 The students' attitude towards the five of communicative tasks

3. Contents

In this study, there were 10 lesson plans using the five communicative tasks.

They were as follows:

- 3.1 Greeting
- 3.2 Places in My Town
- 3.3 On Vacation
- 3.4 Birthday Party
- 3.5 Desert Island
- 3.6 Environment
- 3.7 At the Movies
- 3.8 School Rules
- 3.9 Outstanding Student
- 3.10 Farewell

Definitions of key terms

In this study, a number of key terms were defined as follows:

1. Communicative tasks refer to a piece of classroom work according to which learners need to comprehend, manipulate, produce, or interact in the target language while their attention is significantly focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a complete sense and be able to stand alone as a communicative performance in its own right (Nunan, 1989: 15). According to Pica (1993: 19-40), the terminology of the five communicative tasks is defined as follows:

1.1 Jigsaw refers to an activity in which each group member receives a different part of a text. They need to tell one another about the information in their unique piece of the text and after that achieve the goal which requires information from all of the pieces to be put together.

1.2 Information-gap refers to the activity that involves each learner in a pair or group where each learner has information which the other learners do not have. The learners' information is required to share their information in order to complete a task.

1.3 Decision-making refers to the activity that requires group members to identify alternatives and reach consensus on only one outcome.

1.4 Problem-solving refers to the activity that requires group members to deal with difficult emotion they face and to solve a problem in order to find solution.

1.5 Opinion-exchange refers to the activity that requires group members to express their ideas with others in order to complete the task.

2. Speaking proficiency refers to the ability to speak English fluently, accurately, and appropriately based on the specific criteria (Klanrit, 2005: 21).

3. Attitude refers to opinions, conscious mental position and subconscious emotion in learning a second language (Savignon, 1983: 111).

4. Mattayomsuksa 6 students refer to the twelfth grade students studying at Nongbuapittayakarn School in the second semester of the academic year 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2008: 24).

Significance of the study

It is expected that this study will be of significance as it has potential:

1. To help Mattayomsuksa 6 students in Nongbuapittayakarn School overcome their learning difficulties when speaking English using the five communicative tasks.

2. To determine which of the five communicative tasks is the most effective in developing English speaking proficiency.

3. To encourage a good attitude towards the five communicative tasks.

4. To hopefully gain a positive outcome of the study which will make a significant contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning of spoken English in school.

5. To gain a good sample of the lesson plans by using more communicative tasks activities.