

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Thailand has long maintained its own unique culture and language. The use of English is not a common practice among Thais. Nevertheless, with the advent of globalisation, in which all members of the international community are in closer contact with each other than ever before, the traditional monolingual way of life begins to adjust itself so as to catch up with the world outside. Inevitably, the importance of English cannot be ignored. English is a window to the world, a means not only for international commerce but also for inter-state communication (Manivannan, 2008). Kitao (1996) also agrees that English is a widespread and important language in the world today. It is used for everything from international academic conferences to news reports to popular music lyrics. It is used not only for communication between native speakers and nonnative speakers of English but also between nonnative speakers. Even though it does not have the greatest number of speakers in the world, it is the most widely used language in the world, and it will be used by more people in the future. In the past, inability to communicate in English between pilots resulted in a number of unnecessary airplane accidents which killed hundreds of passengers on board (Schlafly, 2001). In Thailand, many people begin to understand the present situation and like to send their children to English medium schools. That is why educational institutions throughout the country try to increase the amount of English teaching in classrooms. In 1995, the education ministry decided to add an extra four years of English education starting from first grade, rather than fifth (Mackenzie, 2002).

In spite of the growing interest in teaching English, Thai public is very vocal in showing its dissatisfaction with the state education system. Students, parents, and

industry have repeatedly questioned in the national press why, after twelve years of English education, university students' communicative English level was lower than expected and in many cases non-functional (Mackenzie, 2002). Moreover, in an article entitled *Australian Study Cites Low English Standards*, the author (David, 2007) reports that more than half of all Thai students studying at Australian universities failed language test. Lyovarin (2007) accepts that there are some problems regarding the teaching of English as a foreign language in the country.

Nakhonsawan Rajabhat University (NSRU) is no exception. All students at the university, regardless of their specialisations, are required to take the foundation English course. There is no doubt that English is a bitter medicine for Thai students. They find themselves in an educational environment where the teaching style and learning context are different from their former experiences. In a general educational programme, the speaking and listening ability in English of Thai students has been minimal because they have little chance to practice speaking English outside the classroom. Students respond to the teacher only when called upon and the learning atmosphere is individualistic. Moreover, learning English in Thailand is a rote memorisation of new words and sentence structures only. Therefore, Thai students suffer from academic difficulties, for example, participating in classroom activities. This situation leads to high frustration, confusion and stress amongst the students. Therefore, it is important to investigate rigorously what exactly are the real problems of the students and what can be done to possibly solve those problems.

Purposes

The purposes of this study are as follows:

1. To study the problems in learning the foundation English course of students at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University concerning the following aspects:

- Instructor,
- Learner,

- Curriculum and Course book,
- Administration.

2. To compare the problems of the students among faculties.
3. To find solution to the problems.

Significance of the Study

The present study contributes to the body of educational knowledge by increasing the understanding of English problems faced by Thai students. Substantively, the study provides useful information for university staff, faculty professionals, and other concerned personnel who work with Thai students in particular. Hopefully, the results of the study will increase the awareness of the involved personnel and organizations and help with policy and decision making on what should be done to help Thai students studying at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University and other universities in Thailand overcome their difficulties, improve their English skills, and finally achieve their academic success. It is also hoped that the results from this study would increase the sensitivity of personnel, organizations and governments who work with Thai students, to the problems and the solution of Thai students studying English.

Scope of the Study

The present study focuses on undergraduate students at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University who studied in four faculties by examining their problems in learning a foundation English course as well as finding solution to the problems.

The population in this study consisted of 434 undergraduate students who studied the foundation English course in semester 2/2007.

The sample group consisted of 244 undergraduate students who were selected from the population by way of cluster random sampling. These students were

requested to respond to the questionnaire on problems in learning the foundation English course. Furthermore, ten students were randomly selected from this group and were requested to participate in an interview.

Apart from the students, ten instructors who taught the foundation English course in semester 2/2007 were also invited to be interviewees.

Definition of Terms

The terms that are frequently used in this study are defined as shown in the following list:

Administration. The term refers to the management within NSRU that facilitates the teaching and learning process of the foundation English course in semester 2/2007.

Curriculum. This refers to the undergraduate curriculum approved by NSRU in 2006.

Foundation English Course. This course is compulsory for all undergraduate students at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University, regardless of their majors. It is a 3 unit course, entitled *English for Communication*, which is coded 2310102. The course deals with the principle of communication, concentrating on English words and their usage. Practical language training includes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. The spoken language focuses on English for everyday life such as greeting and parting, introducing, ordering meal, shopping, expressing apology, expressing thanks, expressing sympathy, requesting assistance, giving information, and so on. On the other hand, the written language stresses the use of texts of various kinds such as advertisements, announcements, labels, letters, memorandums, forms, and so on.

Instructors. This refers to the ten instructors who taught the foundation English course at NSRU in semester 2/2007.

Learners. This refers to the learners who took the foundation English course at NSRU in semester 2/2007.

Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University. The university is currently located at 398 Sawanwihi Road, Amphur Muang, Nakhon Sawan Province, Thailand. The province of Nakhon Sawan is in the lower northern region of Thailand, about 235 kilometers north of Bangkok along the Asian Highway.

Problems. This refers to the difficulties that the students encountered when they studied the foundation English course. The difficulties are concerned with the 4 areas – instructors, learners, curriculum and textbook, and administration.

Textbook. This refers to the textbook entitled *English for Communication*, compiled in 2006 by Prasop Yolsiritham, Prasert Chanudom, Manlika Phumatana, and Sawalee Bootpradit.