

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



#### 1.1 Rationale

English is considered the most important world language. Crystal (1997) pointed out that English is the global language of business, technology, science, the Internet, popular entertainment, sports, and education. According to Smith (1988), since science and technology are important factors in changing from agricultural to industrial countries, English is an important tool to gain access to much of the world's information and knowledge regarding science and technology. Moreover, throughout the world, especially in the time of globalization, it is undeniable that English is used as a lingua franca of business and international communication. Consequently, learning English apart from first language or national language is needed. Also, the demand of speakers with high proficiency in English is drastically increasing in every country, including Thailand.

Thailand recognized the importance of English and has pursued a policy of learning English for international advancement. In Thailand, English is described as a foreign language by the Ministry of Education. Moreover, according to Foley (2005), English curriculum in Thailand can be viewed as a paradigm shift from English as an elective to English as a compulsory subject. Currently, learning English is divided into four sub-levels of education, with respect to proficiency-based and language abilities of learners; namely, Preparatory Level: *Pratomsuksa* 1 to 3 (Grades 1 to 3), Beginning Level: *Pratomsuksa* 4 to 6 (Grades 4 to 6), Expanding Level: *Matayomsuksa* 1 to 3 (Grades 7 to 9), and Progressive Level: *Matayomsuksa* 4 to 6

(Grades 10 to 12). In other words, Thai students learn English for 12 years, from primary school up until completion of secondary school. However, there are apparent differences in numbers of years of studying English a student is exposed according to the types of schools. That is, more than 90 percent of Thai government schools start teaching English at Grade 5, although it is compulsory to start teaching English at Grade 1 as described by the Ministry of Education.

Despite the fact that English is vital, and Thai students learn English for years, only limited success in learning English has been achieved in Thailand (Chulalongkorn University Academic Service Center, 2000). Several key educators made a great effort to change the current English curriculum from focusing on traditional-grammar approach to functional-communicative approach. However, the majority failed to achieve the standards required. Foley (2005) pointed out that a number of factors likely contributed to this failure: shortage of teaching materials for primary school students and well-trained teachers in English, and lack of the opportunities to be exposed to authentic English in the classroom.

Several studies (e.g. Bunnag, 2005b; Prapphal & Opanon-amata, 2002) have been conducted to focus on English proficiency of Thai students. Such studies revealed that, after measured by several standardized tests (e.g., the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)). Thai students possessed poorer English skills than those in other countries in Southeast Asia, including Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Indeed, Thais had the second-worst English language skill in Southeast Asia. Although more studies are needed to verify Bunnag and Phapphal and Opanon-amata's conclusion because the test takers may be diverse and heterogeneous, their studies are intriguing, revealing how unsatisfactory Thai learners' proficiency of

English is. The studies also call for more in depth studies investigating, e.g., how English should be taught, and how Thai students learn English. In other words, in order for Thais to successfully participate in the international community, English education needs to be substantially improved.

Apart from the studies above, providing a general description of limited success in English education, Yunibandhu (2004) investigated English proficiency of Thai students making a transition from the Thai school system to the international school system. Her study astutely pointed out that Thai students learning at international schools faced linguistic problems including poor English reading and writing skills. Also, these students possessed a low degree of grammatical accuracy in speaking, and encountered difficulty to identify information in listening. Therefore, it can be concluded that the four skills in English of Thai students are still not satisfactory in spite of studying at international schools.

Recognizing the results from such studies and the importance of English in the global market, Bunnag (2005a) stated in her study that low English proficiency was likely to be a barrier for the government's project to turn Thailand into the centre of business under the Detroit of Asia, Medical Hub, Capital of Spa, Thai Kitchen World Cuisine and Bangkok Fashion City projects. Thus, to overcome the barriers that impede the successful execution of these projects, improving learning and teaching English in Thailand is pivotal.

Among the nine ASEAN country members, as far as English language education is concerned, Vietnam deserves our attention for several reasons. In terms of geographic setting, Vietnam and Thailand are both located in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, with respect to political and economic situations, Brogan and Thai Ha (1999) illustrated that Vietnam has changed a great deal during the past two decades

due to the Vietnamese Government's *Doi Moi* policy. This economic open-door policy has resulted in an increase in Vietnam's political, diplomatic and economic relationships with other countries. These changes have demanded a greater number of speakers proficient in English. Concerning the importance of English as an essential means in international trade and business in Southeast Asia, both Thailand and Vietnam want to be a stronger member of the global economy. English is needed not just as a subject to be learned in the classroom but also a medium for social and practical use.

More interestingly, regarding teaching and learning English, in 1992, Angwattanagul (สุมิตรา อังวัฒนกุล, 2535) reported that, in Thailand, English was first taught as a foreign language in schools by British Missionaries in 1845, but the Thai government continued reforming the education system for a long time to improve the Thai students' English proficiency. In Vietnam, according to Think (1999), teaching and learning English was very limited. English was first taught twenty years ago. The importance of English in Vietnam was recognized when Vietnam adopted *Doi Moi* policy in 1986. Since then, English has been taught as a foreign language to students from Grade 6 through secondary school. Although there are differences in the history and development of teaching and learning English of those two countries, it is very interesting that English education in Vietnam has rapidly improved as demonstrated by the fact that Vietnamese students marked higher in several standardized tests when compared with Thai students' scores.

From the above-mentioned evidence, the puzzle is "Why are Vietnamese students more proficient in English than Thai students even though their teaching and learning English is still very limited in Vietnam?" (Think, 1999). Many studies of second language acquisition and learning (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991;

O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) agreed that language learning strategy use is one of the most important factors in second language acquisition. A large number of studies in second language learning (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths & Parr, 2001; Oxford, 1990; Park, 1997; Wharton, 2000) have been well documented by pointing out that successful learners seem to use a wider variety of language learning strategies than unsuccessful learners. For example, as shown by Green and Oxford (1995), successful students often use more active, and naturalistic strategies, and use more combination of strategies than less successful students. Meanwhile, a number of studies also report on the relationships between learning strategies and student's performance; for instance, according to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies could lead learners to the goal of learning a language. Several studies (e.g., Bruen, 2001; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Purpura, 1997; Shen, 2005; Wharton, 2000) also revealed that selecting appropriate strategies could enhance the learners' performance of second language learning. Therefore, it is clear that the choices of strategies used by second language learners plays a significant role in second language learning.

Furthermore, a number of studies have focused on determining the connections between strategy use and factors which affect the choice of language learning strategies (Cotterall, 1999; Ellis, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Ma, 1999; MacIntyre, 1994; Mochizuki, 1999; Ok, 2003; Wen & Wang, 1996; Wharton, 2000). Such studies have claimed that the factors such as age, motivation, language learning goals, previous language learning experience, language learning style, and gender, affect the choice of language learning strategies of language learners. For example, when looking at the types of strategy use, Green and Oxford (1995) affirmed that females show more use of social learning strategies than males. Moreover, nationality

of the language learners seems to be connected to the choices of language learning strategies (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Wharton, 2000). Therefore, a study focusing on both language learning strategies and the factors affecting the choice of each strategy would be beneficial for students, teachers, and educators, providing the useful insights into improving English language learning and proficiency.

From the published research above, despite the fact that over the past decades, researchers have come up with investigation on effective language learning strategies for learning language, certain criticism of this line of research has been raised. First, Griffiths (2003) pointed out that only two studies on language learning strategies based on nationality—Asian and Hispanic students, were reported by Politzer and McGroarty (1985) and by O'Malley (1987). In addition, according to Wharton (2000), the use of different types and numbers of strategies might depend on the characteristics and setting in which learning occurs and the language task to be completed. Next, LoCastro (1994) emphasizes that ethnographic research should precede the development of any derived quantitative research instrument used in the collection of further data on learning strategies in different learning contexts. Finally, there is very little research on effective language learning strategies for Southeast Asian students – virtually none has been done on Thai and Vietnamese students before.

For the above mentioned reasons, this study attempts to investigate the language learning strategies that Thai and Vietnamese undergraduate students use in learning English, and the factors affecting the choices of the strategies. It is hoped that the results from this study will be useful and beneficial in solving problems about English proficiency faced by Thai students. The researcher has three particular purposes in doing the present study.

## 1.2 Purposes of the Study

The aims of this study are:

1. to identify Thai and Vietnamese undergraduate students' language learning strategies in learning English;
2. to compare their language learning strategies; and
3. to determine the factors affecting their choices of language learning strategies.

## 1.3 Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- 1) What are the strategies commonly used by Thai and Vietnamese undergraduate students when studying English?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences in the strategies used by Thai and Vietnamese undergraduate students?
- 3) What are the roles of gender, motivation, and experience in studying English, and Thai and Vietnamese undergraduates' choices of language learning strategies?

## 1.4 Statement of Hypotheses

The hypotheses of this study are:

1. Language learning strategies commonly used by both Thai and Vietnamese undergraduate students include *Direct Strategies* and *Indirect Strategies* (Oxford, 1990).

*Direct Strategies* include: 1) memory strategies e.g., applying images and sound 2) cognitive strategies e.g., through reasoning, summary, note-taking, and 3)

compensation strategies e.g., using synonyms or paraphrasing.

*Indirect Strategies* include: 1) metacognitive strategies e.g., making study plans according to one's purpose 2) affective strategies e.g., singing songs in a target language to lower one's anxiety, and 3) social strategies e.g., asking questions, cooperating with peers.

2. Thai undergraduates use their learning strategies differently from those of Vietnamese undergraduates. That is, Vietnamese undergraduates tend to use wider range of strategies than Thai undergraduates. It is hypothesized that Vietnamese undergraduates probably use more metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategy categories than Thai undergraduates because the literature shows that successful learners will generally use these kinds of strategies than less successful learners.

3. Factors affecting the choice of language learning strategies used by Thai and Vietnamese undergraduate students are: 1) gender, 2) motivation and 3) experience in studying English.

Regarding gender, Gender difference was a remarkable factor which affected the choice of strategies (Green & Oxford, 1995). Moreover, female students used strategies more frequently than male counterparts in all categories of strategies (Green & Oxford, 1995; Mochizuki, 1999). Therefore, in the present study, it is hypothesized that among Thai and Vietnamese undergraduate students, females use more and a wider range of strategies than men.

With respect to motivation, it is assumed that Thai undergraduate students have a lower degree of motivation than Vietnamese undergraduate students. Therefore, it is assumed that Thai undergraduates, both highly-motivated and lowly-motivated groups employ language learning strategies less frequently than



Vietnamese undergraduate students, respectively.

In terms of experience in studying English, Thai undergraduates have more experience than Vietnamese undergraduate students in studying English based on the number of years of English education. On language learning strategies, thus, it is hypothesized that Thai undergraduates, both additional experienced and without additional experienced groups use more and wider range of strategies than Vietnamese undergraduates.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study will help Thai students become aware of the use of language learning strategies. The findings would benefit the development of teaching and learning English, particularly, in the Thai context. Also, the results of this study would help Thai students learn English effectively, and help teachers and education planners implement the new English language teaching initiatives to enhance English proficiency of Thai students. Finally, this study could provide additional, broader, and deeper insights into the topic of teaching and learning English as an international language.

### **1.6 Organization of the Thesis**

In general, the organization of the study is briefly described as follows:

Chapter One deals with the introduction of the study. First, the rationale and background of the study is described. Second, the purposes of the study are presented. In addition, the questions addressed in this study are provided, followed by the statements of hypotheses. The significance of the study is discussed at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Two reviews literature which this study is based. The review begins with the development of English education in Thailand, including English proficiency of Thai students. Then, the term “Language Learning Strategies” is discussed, followed by the explanation of the “Strategy Inventory of Language Learning or SILL”. In addition, previous studies on language learning strategies using the SILL and relevant research in this area are summarized. The final section of this chapter is devoted to previous works on factors contributing to the choices of language learning strategies.

Chapter Three deals with the methodology which is employed in this study. First, the population and sampling is presented. The selection of academic institutes is defined. Second, the instruments are discussed with reference to research which employed these types of instruments. Also, a description how the data was collected and prepared for analysis. At the end of the chapter, the statistical analysis is briefly presented.

Chapter Four and Five presents the findings regarding language learning strategies used by Thai and Vietnamese students, respectively. These two chapters report the findings in terms of the most and the least used strategies. The responses from the interviews which are the qualitative part of this study are also presented.

Chapter Six deals with the comparison of the use of language learning strategies by Thai and Vietnamese students. This chapter presents and discusses results of the comparison with respect to the similarities and differences in strategy use of the two groups of students.

Chapter Seven presents the findings regarding variables contributing to the choices of language learning strategies. The results of the statistical analysis are presented and discussed regarding what relationship between language learning

strategies and gender, motivation, and experience in studying English.

Chapter Eight is devoted to a summary of the study, including the findings presented in the preceding chapters. Discussions of the findings are also presented in this chapter. In addition, pedagogical implications are made as to the improvement of English education in Thailand. Finally, suggestions for future research in the area of language learning strategies are discussed.

