

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



#### **Background and significance of the problem**

Learning English in countries where English is not the native language is increasingly important as English is considered one of the most important world languages. This is partly due to the advance of technology, particularly the use of computers and the Internet for global communication (e.g. email) and searching for valuable knowledge and information. Modern and advanced technology has resulted in the use of English in almost every section of our society, such as in business and international business sectors, in education (from kindergarten to higher education), in public communication, and in the tourism industry, to name just a more prominent few. Consequently, demand for highly proficient English communicators is increasing dramatically.

The perception that values the importance of English has been supported by many studies from several regions, especially from within Asia such as a survey of Chinese business professionals on English language needs for WTO entry (Pang et al., 2002). It reveals that English is of unprecedented importance in Chinese education within the context of China's increasing active involvement in the process of economic globalization and international cooperation. The study also highlights the fact that listening and speaking skills are considered the most important skills among the four skills comprising writing, translation, reading, and listening-speaking. Greater demand for effective English communication professionals influences the English learning and teaching structure in China as well as in the countries where this similar context applies. Thus, learning English especially for communicative purposes has become an urgent issue for many countries including Thailand.

It is known that English is considered as one of the most important subjects in the Thai educational system. In today's age of globalization, English is not only a tool for communication but also a device to enable learners to increase their knowledge of the world (Promsiri, Prapphal, & Vijchulata, 1996). English is also a major medium in international trade, in the import and export business, and in some other businesses and industries. As a result, the drive to learn English as a second or foreign language

(ESL and EFL) has been accelerated. Thai students need to learn English to acquire the language as well as to use all four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—effectively and efficiently.

According to Trim (1983: 79), “communication is essential to life and central to human existence.” When comparing the quantity of all the conversations people produce in one day with the number of written messages or the amount of reading, it is discovered that oral communication is used or produced far more often than the other two skills. Support can be found in Rivers’ (1981) claim that speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing outside the classroom, as well as Brown’s (1994) that speaking and listening are the two skills that are used the most inside the classroom. The claim that oral communication is more often needed and utilized is especially true for Thais, who operate in an oral culture in which interaction between individuals is more favorable than interaction between human beings and written texts. This can be seen in the rapidly increasing number of cell phones that are broadly used for oral conversation among people from all socioeconomic and social statuses nowadays. Thus, it is necessary for foreign language learners to practice all of the language skills including communication skills if they want to become competent users of the target language.

In the past, the ability to read and write in English received more emphases than the other two skills of speaking and listening, and this is probably due to the needs to acquire academic knowledge and technology from the more developed countries. However, as the needs to communicate orally in English has been widely recognized, teaching and learning English should no longer be focused only on reading and writing skills, but close attention should also be paid to development and enhancement of oral communication skills. Put another way, it is important for Thai students to master oral communication skills if they wish to have better opportunities for personal advancement, e.g. getting well-paid jobs, having opportunity for further studies, and gaining knowledge and materials. Unfortunately, many survey findings have indicated that Thai students still lack this oral communication ability (Raergsomboj, 2003; Limwattana, 2004; and Kaochan, 2005).

Acquiring oral communication skills has long been a problem for EFL learners, and “language teaching globally has not yet led to a satisfactory level of communicative skill in the vast majority of cases” (Allwright, 1979: 167) although a lot of efforts have been made in order to find the effective solutions to this problem.

As communication is an interactive process of constructing meaning which involves receiving, processing, and producing information to convey meaning (Brown, 1994), it is a tough task for EFL learners to acquire these skills. They must learn all the linguistic knowledge that is necessary, receive and decode the message, retrieve the knowledge, and then produce the language to convey the intended message by using accurate linguistic knowledge, e.g. sound and sound system, vocabulary, grammar, etc. It is even more difficult to be a competent speaker as Savignon (1983) suggests. She points out that communicative competence is not only an interpersonal interaction which involves two or more persons negotiating meaning together, but it is also a social relationship between the speakers. This involves the role of context in determining a specific communicative competence, the infinite variety of situations in which communication takes place, and the dependence of success in a particular role on one's understanding of the context and on prior experience of a similar kind. Therefore, to improve learners' oral skills, an appropriate direction, guidance, and instruction for teaching and learning are needed to provide learners with opportunities to interact both as the receivers and the producers of the language in the pedagogic environment as well as in real-life situations where students should be able to properly communicate by synthesizing their linguistic knowledge with the social context and their prior experience. Put another way, the pedagogic or real world situations in which students are able to practice their interactive oral communication process should be appropriately created and provided to the students so that they are able to improve their oral ability effectively.

With regard to the national curriculum, English has assumed a position of importance in Thai education. Educational institutes of all levels have realized and responded to this urgent need. Kasetsart University (henceforth KU) is one of the most prestigious public universities, and it offers a variety of programs for students who have completed their secondary schooling to further their education in the areas of science, business, and humanities. As the university realizes that its graduates need to learn not only the general knowledge in a specific field but also specific skills which will support their future careers or further education, the university requires students to attend elective English courses in addition to the general compulsory courses.

Many research findings have indicated that most national and international workplaces prefer employees who can communicate well in English as a large

number, if not most, of employers, business partners, and clients are foreigners whose medium of communication is English. In other words, companies would rather hire the applicants who are qualified and who demonstrate the ability to use English well, especially when communicating orally. Unfortunately, most Thai university graduates' English proficiency does not meet this requirement.

According to Wiriyachitra (2001), the former Ministry of University Affairs issued a reform of English language teaching and learning in Thai higher education institutions. With such a reform, efforts have been made to improve the English curriculum in the higher education in Thailand. However, despite the existence of such reform, the results of subsequent studies have revealed that little change has been made in English language teaching and learning. For instance, Maskhao (2002) reports that most Thai EFL teachers still use the teaching method they are familiar with, namely, a textbook-based, grammar-translation approach where lessons and tests mostly focus on grammatical structures, vocabulary, and reading. Such discrepancy between an attempt to bring about a timely and needed reform and the actual classroom practice which is still unable to lead learners to mastery of the target language is highlighted in several researcher studies. For example, Prapphal (2003) reports that the majority of the graduates from local universities in Thailand could not meet the standard required for studying at the graduate level, both in and out of the country, the latter of which requires the minimum TOEFL score of at least 550 which roughly translates to band six on the IELTS scale, implying effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies, and misunderstanding and the ability to use and understand fairly complex language particularly in the academically-related situations. In addition, despite long years of studying English in school, research findings, including Keyurawong (2002) and Wiriyachitra (2002), also point out that Thai students in general are still unable to achieve mastery of the English language required in the workplace.

The necessity of turning out graduates who are qualified in terms of their specific academic knowledge and who have acquired sufficient English language skills is recognized by KU. To provide the students with the opportunities to practice English skills, the university requires all KU students to attend at least four English courses in order to complete their undergraduate program of study. Every student has to study the three foundation English courses and one elective course according to

their interests, e.g. Writing I, Reading I, Reading for Mass Communication, or Listening and Speaking I, to name just a few.

However, it is worth noting that most of the elective courses provided by KU emphasize reading and writing skills. Of the total 16 elective courses, only one course focuses specifically on the development of listening and speaking skills. This means that students have only one option if they intend to practice their oral skills. Listening and Speaking I, the only course that provides students with a chance to practice listening and speaking skills, emphasizes practicing certain functional language including greetings, making requests, or giving personal information. In practicing such functional language, students are provided with opportunity to listen to conversations, learn vocabulary, study the functions of the language, practice pronunciation of certain sounds, repeat sentences after the model sentences, and then practice all these elements in the situation provided; that is, students practice listening and speaking skills in simulated activities in the classroom. In doing so, it is expected that students may be able to transfer this knowledge to use in real-world situations.

Not only does the university recognize the significance of improving its students' oral communication ability, but the students themselves also acknowledge their needs to further develop this ability. The result from a questionnaire carried out by the researcher in 2004 with KU non-English major undergraduate students revealed that 72 out of 95 students listed oral communication as their number one priority when asked which English skill they wanted to improve the most.

With such realization of the importance of development of oral communication ability, an effective English oral communication course needs to be developed and offered to KU students. It is the researcher's belief that this can be done if students can practice and use the target language in real-life situations simultaneously with in-class learning. This is because students will be able to reinforce the knowledge accumulated from the classrooms by reproducing and reusing the learned language through interaction in actual settings.

In summary, there is a need to develop a course which aimed at promoting KU students' English oral communication ability. In order to create an environment where students are exposed to the target language and use it properly, carefully planned tasks and activities need to be designed. During the course of instruction, students need to actively take a major role as well as responsibility to plan, manage, and present their work, while the teacher is assigned the role of a facilitator who is ready to help fill in

the gaps if necessary. By being involved in this kind of instruction, students are expected to be fully motivated, and they will have more opportunities to practice and use the target language meaningfully in authentic situations, eventually leading to a higher level of oral communication ability.

### **Objectives of the study**

There have been a number of studies that investigated students' English needs in all levels in Thailand, and a lot of efforts have been made to improve students' oral communication ability by using various teaching and learning approaches. The Project-based Learning Approach is one of the teaching approaches that have been used in language classes to improve students' English oral proficiency. However, only few research studies have been conducted to shed light on the effectiveness of the Project-based Learning Approach to promote students' oral communication ability in the university level context. Therefore, the present study was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To identify and describe Kasetsart University students' English oral communication needs
2. To develop the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach and English oral communication needs of Kasetsart University students
3. To investigate the effectiveness of the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach in enhancing English oral communication ability of Kasetsart University students
4. To explore Kasetsart University students' opinions toward the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach

### **Research questions**

Based on the aforementioned discussion on the necessity to design a course to promote English oral communication ability of the students, the present research aimed to seek answers for the following research questions:

1. What are Kasetsart University students' needs of English oral communication?

2. How can the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach be developed?

3. Is the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach effective in enhancing Kasetsart University students' English oral communication ability? If yes, to what extent does the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach improve the students' English oral communication ability?

4. What are the Kasetsart University students' opinions toward the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach?

### **Statement of Hypothesis**

The findings from previous studies (L. Hosie, 1999; Dhieb-Henia, 1999; Gu, 2002) have indicated that the Project-based Learning Approach can effectively be employed to develop students' English oral communication ability. Based on such research findings, the hypothesis set for this study is as follows:

The English oral communication post-test average scores of the students studying in the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach will be significantly higher than the pre-test average scores.

### **Scope of the study**

The present study was quasi-experimental research with the one-group pre-test and post-test design. It aimed at investigating the effectiveness of an English oral communication course developed on the basis of the Project-based Learning Approach and the KU students' English oral communication needs to promote English oral communication ability of KU students. The study sample consisted of 22 KU undergraduate students who completed the compulsory Foundation English III course and were enrolled in the Listening and Speaking I, the English oral communication course developed based on the Project-based Learning Approach, in the second semester of the academic year 2006. Data for the main study were collected by means of pre-test and post-test using the Simulation Oral Test (The Group Project Simulation Task), a semi-structured interview protocol, learner log, and teacher's diary. Descriptive statistics of percentage, mean, and standard deviation, as

well as inferential statistics of paired sample *t*-test were used to analyze quantitative data, while content analysis and categorization were utilized to analyze qualitative data.

### **Limitations of study**

The present study employed a one-group pre-test post-test design, and this design is generally considered rather weak because uncontrolled-for threats to internal validity exist and may explain the findings on the post-test. Furthermore, the study sample consisted of 22 Kasetsart university students, so it was considered a rather small sample size. Also, the subjects were selected by means of a purposive sampling method, so the findings of this study may not be generalizable to the population in any other context. Finally, the subjects' levels of proficiency were categorized according to their final grades in the Foundation English III course, which is an integrated skills course, rather than their scores on the pre-test which would have reflected their oral communication skill more accurately.

### **Definitions of terms**

#### ***English oral communication ability***

Owen (1984) defines the term 'oral communication ability' as the process of exchanging information, thoughts, and ideas between speakers and hearers. According to Omaggio (1986), oral communication ability refers to the ability to communicate verbally in a functional and accurate way in the target language. Despite variations in the definition of the term given by different researchers, in this study, English oral communication ability is defined as the general oral communication ability that the subjects exhibited while they were interacting with peers in the group discussion tasks and the oral presentation ability that the subjects performed orally while they were giving their project presentations. The general oral communication was measured by using the Analytical Rubric for the General Oral Communication to account for comprehensibility, fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The oral presentation was measured by using the Analytical Rubric for the Oral Presentation. The criteria involved content-organization-coherence, volume-rate, articulation-pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar.



Essentially, oral communication ability involves speaking and listening abilities, one being unable to develop without the other.

### ***Listening ability***

Listening refers to the ability that an individual is able to understand or comprehend the perceived verbal message by retaining information in memory, integrate it with what follows, and continually adjust their understanding of what they hear in the light of prior knowledge and of incoming information. (Wilkinson, Stratta, & Dudley, 1974) In this study, students needed to perceive the message that the interlocutors delivered during the course of conversations or discussions when they were managing the project, both in the classroom setting and in the real-life situations outside class. In brief, each student had to understand the received message so as to respond properly to what the interlocutor initiated.

### ***Speaking ability***

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves receiving, processing, and producing information (Brown, 1994). In this study, speaking ability refers to the ability of an individual in an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves receiving, processing, and producing information orally during the course of an interaction while completing a project.

### ***Project-based Learning Approach***

Project-based Learning Approach is an approach based on social constructivism, learner-centered approach, and cooperative learning (Kim, 2001). The theoretical principles emphasize the process in which learners work cooperatively in teams to accomplish the series of authentic tasks that they have planned by themselves. In doing so, learners are provided with opportunities to develop the target language proficiency, especially English oral communication ability, including listening and speaking ability, as the language is needed for carrying out meaningful communication throughout different stages of fulfilling the authentic tasks, with teachers playing the role of facilitators instead of directors of the learning process as in a more “traditional instruction.” In this study, the Project-based Learning Approach offered students the opportunity to work together to brainstorm and discuss, plan the projects, collect and compile the information, prepare and practice for the

presentation, give the presentation, and evaluate the process and projects, both their own and others'.

### ***Project work***

Project work or project work instruction is a language learning instruction whose principles are based on the Project-based Learning Approach. Project work refers to the highly motivated instructional model that intends to engage learners in authentic and real world tasks (Moss, & Carol, 1998) to improve their English language ability. In this study, project work refers to a language learning instruction that is intended to improve KU students' English oral communication ability and emphasized the process in which students work cooperatively in fixed-groups to accomplish the series of tasks, from agreeing on a theme for the project, determining the final outcome, structuring the project, planning all the steps of the project in details, gathering information, compiling and analyzing information, preparing for the final presentation, presenting the final product, to evaluating the process and projects. For example, to collect data for their project, students had to interact with the English speakers orally and meaningfully, such as interviewing tourists who were native English speakers and surveying foreigners' opinions on certain issues or topics of interest before reporting their final products orally to the whole class at the end of each project.

### ***English oral communication course***

English oral communication course in this study is the course which aimed at promoting KU students' English oral communication ability by using the Project-based Learning Approach. It was offered to KU students as one of the elective courses students were able to choose in accordance with the English skills they wanted to practice or develop. As it was developed on the principles of the Project-based Learning Approach, the course provided the students with the opportunities to work cooperatively in teams to manage projects, hence equipping them with the knowledge and skills that were necessary for doing projects, e.g., practicing presentation skills, learning to effectively use the Internet dictionary websites, etc. Apart from offering the chance to work in groups to achieve the shared goal, the course also enabled students to learn how to give presentations orally. In short, the course helped the students increase their English oral communication ability, working skills and

interpersonal skills that were necessary for their personal and professional lives after graduation.

### **Expected outcomes and benefits**

1. As the English oral communication course was designed based on KU students' English oral communication needs, it is expected that KU students will have a course that more directly and effectively serves their particular need to develop their English oral communication ability.

2. The newly developed course could be considered an option for KU faculty members who wish to teach an English oral communication course to help lead their students to mastery of oral communication ability in English.

3. Since it is Kasetsart University's responsibility to turn out graduates who are qualified in terms of their specific academic knowledge and their sufficient English language skills necessary for their future careers or their further education, the university will benefit from having an English oral communication course that better serves students' English needs.

4. One of the purposes of this study was to prove the effectiveness of the English oral communication course based on the Project-based Learning Approach. Therefore, the findings on the effectiveness of the Project-based Learning Approach in enhancing students' English oral communication ability can pave the way for other researchers who share similar interests in this particular teaching approach who can carry out their own research whose findings can help expand the existing body of knowledge in this field and benefit Thai language learners in general.

### **An overview of the study**

There are five chapters in this dissertation.

This chapter presents the background of the study, the research questions, and research objectives in response to the current problem. It also describes the scope of the study, definition of terms, limitations, and significance of the study.

Chapter Two reviews related literature and existing research relevant to this study.

Chapter Three covers the research methodology of the study including the research design, population and sample, research instruments, and procedures of collecting and analyzing the data.

Chapter Four presents the results and findings of the study.

Chapter Five summarizes the study, discusses the findings, and presents the recommendations for further research.