

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides the introductory accounts of English in Thailand. EFL policy in the Thai educational system and its history are explained in order to know some background to EFL in Thailand. The status, roles and functions of English in Thai society are described. In relation to the scope of this study which is focused on university students, the background of English language teaching at the tertiary level is provided. Moreover, the statement of the problem is discussed in terms of English language teaching in general and vocabulary teaching in particular. In this chapter, the aims of the study, research questions, significance of the study, scope and limitation of the study and definitions of terms are also provided.

1.1 EFL Policy in the Thai Educational System

In a country that has one dominant language like Thailand, English is considered as a foreign language. The English language came to Thailand during the reign of King Rama III (1824-1851) (Durongphan et al., 1982). It was essential for the Siamese royalty and the ruling class such as the higher court officials and administrators to acquire the knowledge of western sciences and modern technology (Masavisut et al, 1986). During the reign of King Mongkut, English was first brought and taught to the royal family and the Thai government officials. The main purpose was for the advantage of the country in using English to negotiate with international traders, particularly from Europe countries. In 1921, English was a compulsory subject for students after Grade 4. The targets of English Language Teaching (ELT) were to develop people in the country and to enable children to

learn and to communicate in English with teachers in English-speaking classrooms (Aksornkul, 1980). In 1960, the goal of ELT gave more focus on English for international communication. The audio-lingual method was replaced rote memorizations and grammar translation methods. In 1996 a more dramatic change took place. The government supported the study of the English language in primary schools as a compulsory subject for all primary school children from Grade 1 (Foley, 2005). The main goal was to develop the students' language proficiency to fulfill a number of purposes: communication, acquisition of knowledge, use of English in tertiary level studies, career advancement and so on.

According to the 1996 and the more recent 2001 English curricula, the status of English was “a paradigm shift from English as an elective to English as a compulsory subject” (Foley, 2005: 226). The Ministry of Education declared English within the school curriculum to be a core subject which is compulsory for all students. The new National Educational Curriculum, which is based on the 1997 Constitution of Thailand, reflects the changes of the basic structures of Thai society. The government provides 12 years of free basic education system for the teaching and learning of English, “compulsory from Grade 1 to Grade 9 and English is optional from Grade 10 to Grade 12” (Wongsothom, 2000, cited in Foley, 2005: 223). In 2006, the Ministry of Education supports a bill to establish an accelerated English programme in the schools, in which students spend up to 15 hours per week studying various subjects in English (Nimkannon, 2006). In addition, the recent government of the Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva under the new cabinet-council approved the budget for 15 years of free basic education. What this means is that Thai students now are more advantageous and able to learn English more than previous.

1.2 The Status, Role and Function of English in Thailand

Based on the use of English in Thailand, it is more considered as a foreign language than as a second language. It is used neither as an official language in the social sector nor as a medium of instruction for school subjects. The needs and purposes of most Thais are for international communication and not for intranational communication. As a result, Thailand and Thai people are categorized within the expanding circle of the Kachruvian paradigm (Kachru, 1985).

A national survey on English language use revealed that English, in Thailand, is used to communicate with native speakers (NS) from both the 'central' English speaking countries (UK, US, Australia, etc.), and non-NS from countries such as Japan, Singapore, Germany, etc. as an international language (Wongsothorn et al., 1996). The use of English among Thais to communicate with each other in everyday life is not common in Thai society.

Thai people, however, value highly the importance of English. Education Ministry's Permanent Secretary Khunying Ksama Varavarn Na Ayutthaya says for the interview of The *Bangkok Post* that "while basic comprehension of English will also bring about a better understanding of other cultures, not just American or British culture, the country also needs to support Thai people who have the potential to excel in the language, for trade negotiation and higher education purposes" (2006). In Thai society, in addition, English has been used for many functions in various domains. According to McKay (1992), Thais give much emphasis to English because it is very important for their work both for the present and the future, particularly, for overseas employment. Besides the mother tongue, proficiency in English helps Thais to access technical and business information as

well. In the governmental domain, it is used for regional conferences, by diplomats in international relations, and by Thai negotiators in promoting Thailand's industrial enterprises and products. In the commercial sector, English also plays a very important role, especially in international corporations and the import/export businesses. Being a country that depends heavily on tourism industry, English is widely used in services like tour companies, hotel services, and airlines. In the domains of marketing and advertising, English is present almost everywhere in business and store signs, daily product labels, titles of book and magazines, printing on T-shirts, bill boards, and posters.

Besides, English is widely used in the mass media and publication domains. Two English newspapers, *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post* are published in English and popular among educated Thais and foreign official workers in Thailand. In addition, some magazines including *Nation Junior*, *Student Weekly*, *Student Times*, and *The Future* are English publications for educational purposes catering particularly to students and Thai teenagers. Some Thai educational journals are also published in English, for example, *PASAA (Phasa Parithat)*, a linguistic journal by Chulalongkorn University and *Journal of English Studies*, a linguistic journal of department of English, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University. *Sawasdee* and *Kinnaree* are other well-known English magazines among tourists served by Thai Airways. Regarding media, many TV programmes offer tips in the learning English, i.e. *News Line*, *Morning Talk*, and *Talk of the Town* and *Chris Delivery*. English movies with English sound tracks are limited on TV programmes because they are all dubbed into the Thai language. However, those with English soundtrack and Thai sub-titles are shown widely in cinemas. Moreover, English news from BBC London and from Thailand's international broadcast radio is transmitted nationwide. Nowadays,

more alternative programmes such as documentaries, sitcoms, movies, pet shows and etc. in English are provided in Samart and UBC satellites.

1.3 Background of English Language Teaching at the Tertiary Level in Thailand

Nowadays, a traditional way of English teaching in Thailand can still be seen, even at the tertiary level. However, many schools and universities are trying to modernize and adopt more contemporary and effective teaching methods. The 1999 National Educational Act reflects an attempt on the part of the government to revise English language teaching in the Thai educational system. At the tertiary level, the approach to language teaching has been changed from traditional and conservative to functional-communicative with an eclectic orientation. At the same time, it also emphasizes the learner-centered approach and performance-based assessment. The English curriculum in the universities now requires 12 credits, six in general English and the other six in English for academic or specific purposes. The curriculum also emphasizes independent work, autonomous learning and self-access learning. The goal is to have an English curriculum that is commonly accepted and implemented in all Thai Universities, both public and private (Foley, 2005).

At the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, courses which are offered to students are aimed at enhancing student English ability through information, communication technology and self-access learning and to develop and evaluate courses like Foundation English, English for Academic Purposes, Advanced English, Professional English and Graduate English Programmes for Students (Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, 2003). At the Prince of Songkla University where this study has been conducted, the goal of the English courses is to enable students to communicate accurately

and effectively and to apply in their working life and also in further studies (English language syllabus, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, 2003). 6 credits of General English, a core subject, are required for all first year students. However, those who scored less than 30 in the nation's entrance score examination, another 3 credits of Foundation English are required. English major students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences have to take 31 credits comprising listening-speaking, translation, reading, writing, literature and grammar.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Vocabulary is an important component in English language teaching. McCarthy (1990: viii), states in his introduction that “No matter how well the student learn grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way”. However, in the real teaching classroom, vocabulary is not as important as the aspect of grammar. Richards (1985: 176) reveals that “the teaching and learning of vocabulary has never aroused the same degree of interest within language teaching as have such issues as grammatical competence, contrastive analysis, reading or writing, which have received considerable attention from scholars and teachers”. In addition, grammatical well-formedness of a composition is the main focus of many second and foreign language teachers in the teaching of writing. Lexis in language teaching, in general, and in the teaching of writing, in particular, is misunderstood because of the assumption that “grammar is the basis of language and that mastery of the grammatical system is a prerequisite for effective communication”. (Lewis, 2002: 133).

In Thailand, too, vocabulary teaching is not the main focus. In the Thai education system, particularly at the tertiary level, it appears to be that lexis is not given much emphasis in the teaching class. When correcting students' writing, teachers pay more attention to the grammatical errors than to the lexical errors even though they are main errors found in a composition. In addition, teachers still use a limited range of methods. Pookcharoen (2007: 90) explains problems of ineffective vocabulary instruction in Thailand that:

“At present, most still use the traditional ways of teaching vocabulary. Their common emphases are on memorizing and translation-based teaching strategies...some ask students to look for dictionary definitions whereas others ask students to memorize the translation equivalents in Thai. Teachers usually use decontextual methods to teach words in isolation rather than showing students how to make use of contextual clues”.

As for the students, in order to obtain a good mark, their attention is given more to the grammar than to vocabulary use when they are required to write a composition. This is partly due to the influence of previous instruction in the schools which relied heavily on the grammar-translation method. As a result, a poor command of vocabulary is commonly observed and numerous lexical errors are found in the compositions of Thai EFL students.

As stated previously, English is considered to be a foreign language used only at international level to communicate with native speakers from English speaking countries such as the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand and non-native speakers from countries such as Japan and Singapore (Wongsothorn et al., 1996). Thai students generally do not have enough exposure to intensive and extensive practice of the target language in the

natural context. Their command of English vocabulary is also very poor. Vocabulary still appears to be a major problem among Thai students who study English as a foreign language (Waemusa, 1993). Sawangwaroros (1984) reported that Thai EFL learners are weak in vocabulary knowledge, which results in their being unable to effectively perform in the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Navasumrit (1989) indicated that Thai students encounter a major problem in learning EFL because they have insufficient vocabulary knowledge.

Intensive and extensive listening and reading in the target language are one important activities which help students to enrich their knowledge of the lexis (Moudraia, 2002), but such activities are rarely seen among Thai EFL students. Activities such as listening and reading activities in the classroom, listening to news on the BBC, watching movies or reading novels, short stories, and newspapers outside the class are rare and difficult to be put into practice. There is lack of reinforcement of what they learn in the classroom. This is another problem affecting the level of students' proficiency and is one of the main cause of lexical errors found in compositions.

Besides, many western and local educationists have criticized Thai education institutions, at the primary secondary and also tertiary levels for taking a traditional and conservative approach to the teaching of EFL. As KirtiKara (2003: 2) says: "The curriculum emphasized grammar, reading and comprehension. Not much was offered on conversation and essay writing."

It has been pointed out that what Thai EFL students acquire from the curriculum is more passive knowledge. Productive use of vocabulary both in conversation and essay

writing is very much lacking in practice. Thus, students still produce vocabulary errors in their written production. The lack of emphasis on lexis in the teaching of EFL in Thailand makes this study relevant by focusing on the lexical errors found in the written English of Thai EFL students.

1.5 Aims of the Study

The main aim of this study is to identify and classify the different types of lexical errors in the written English of Thai EFL learners of English at the tertiary level. This study also attempts to give adequate explanations as to why the errors are made, to provide suggestions and recommendations in order to improve the acquisition of vocabulary among Thai EFL learners, as well as to provide suggestions for the improvement of the teaching of vocabulary in the EFL Classroom.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions in this study are as follows:

1. What are the types of lexical errors produced by Thai EFL students in their written compositions?
2. What are the causes and possible sources of Thai EFL students' lexical errors?

1.7 Significance of the Study

Lexical choice is an area that has not been given as much attention as grammar in the teaching of English in Thailand. Lack of research in this area makes this study different from other studies on what conducted in Thailand. This study is meaningful and useful for both teachers and learners.

It is hoped that this study will help learners to have a better understanding of the errors, acknowledge the causes of such errors and improve their use of vocabulary. The emphasis on the learners' lexical errors will make the learners realize the importance of correct use of vocabulary in essay writing and will pay attention to lexis as well as to grammar.

The findings of this research are also applicable to pedagogy. Lexical errors of Thai EFL students will arouse teachers' awareness of the importance of vocabulary teaching and give as much emphasis to it as to the teaching of grammar. The lexical errors will help teachers to understand their students' difficulties in learning vocabulary and this will further help teachers to plan and design more effective materials for vocabulary teaching.

As there are very few studies on Error Analysis in Thailand that focus on lexis, this research will hopefully be useful in improving Thai EFL students' learning of the English language, and in particular, the vocabulary.

1.8 Scope and Limitation

The subjects selected for this study are students of Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus. Their linguistic and educational background may not be representative of Thai students from other universities, particularly, in Bangkok, where they may have better linguistic and educational backgrounds. Because the status of English is a foreign language (EFL) for Thai society, not all of students at this university are proficient in English. As a

result, only English major students from both the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences were chosen for this study.

According to the course programme, the students from these two faculties have mostly taken the same English subjects. Except for subjects related to teaching which are meant for students from the Faculty of Education, general English, listening and speaking, writing, and reading classes are mostly the same. In order to obtain valid results, this study focuses only on the fourth year English major students. Their level of English proficiency is better than that of students from the other years of study. In addition to all the writing courses they have followed from the first to the fourth year, they are able to perform much more effectively in the written work. The main focus of this study is lexical errors in the written English of Thai EFL students. Errors in Grammar, therefore, are not included. However, there is some overlapping in the explanation of errors because some errors have several sources. Students' written work, questionnaire, and vocabulary tests are the instruments used in the analysis of this study. There is no students' interview to find out why they make such errors.

1.9 Definition of Terms

a. Lexical Errors

Lexis can be defined as “the vocabulary of a language in contrast to its grammar”. The term ‘error’ is used to refer to “the use of a linguistic item (in the speech or writing of a second or foreign language learner) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning” (Richards et al., 1992: 127, 213). Thus, the lexical errors in this study refer to the errors which are classified according

to vocabulary at a word level. Mistakes which are caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspect of performance are not concerned.

b. Error Analysis

This refers to the examination of learner's errors which are attributable to diverse sources and not merely mother tongue interference or interlingual sources. It is the observation, analysis and classification of errors to reveal something of the system operating within the learner (Brown, 1994). It is the study made by second language learners which may be carried out in order to "(i) identify strategies which learners use in language learning, (ii) try to identify the causes of learner errors, (iii) and obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials" (Richards et al., 1992: 127).

c. Interlingual Errors

They refer to "errors which results from language transfer which is caused by the learner's native language" (Richards et al., 1992: 187).

d. Intralingual Errors

They are errors result from "faulty or partial learning of the target language, rather than from language transfer" (Richards et al., 1992: 187). In other word, they refer to errors which occur due to difficulties found within the TL or the learners in ignorance of the TL on rule learning such as false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, exploiting redundancy and overgeneralization (James, 1998).

e. Native Language (NL)

This refers to “the language which a person acquires in early childhood because it is spoken in the family and/or it is the language of the country where he or she is living” (Richards et al., 1992: 241).

f. Mother Tongue (MT)

It is “a first language which is acquired at home” (Richards et al., 1992: 238).

g. Target Language (TL)

Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics defines this as “the language which a person is learning, in contrast to a first language or mother tongue” (Richards et al., 1992: 373). The target language of this study is English (the language into which a translation from Thai is made).

h. English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

EFL refers to “the role of English in countries where it is taught as a subject in schools but not used as a medium of instruction in education nor as a language of communication e.g. in government, business, or industry within the country” (Richards et al., 1992: 125).

I. Thai EFL Students

Thai EFL students refer to the students at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani, Thailand who use Thai as a medium of instruction and learn English as a foreign language.

1.10 Summary

In relations to this study, the researcher has discussed the background of English in Thailand. In addition, the researcher has also stated the problem of vocabulary teaching and learning and the limitation of research, in depth, in the field of lexis in Thailand. It could be claimed that this study is the first of such research done which focuses only on lexical errors with no concentration on grammatical errors, particularly, at the Prince of Songkla University.