

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale for the Study

Because of globalization, English plays an important role as a tool of international communication. Thailand has been realizing the need to develop its people's English proficiency, especially aural-oral communication (Nationmultimedia, 2005). Since 1995, the Ministry of Education has encouraged that the teaching of English as a foreign language starts from Prathomsuksa 1 (Grade 1), which had been previously launched. But it had been disregarded due to unqualified English teachers (Sawaswadee, 1991 as cited in Prapaisit, 2003, p. 14) and in reality most of schools continued to start teaching English at Prathomsuksa 3 (Grade 3) due to the lack of English teachers (Punthumasen, 2007, p. 6). Almost all Thai schools teach reading and writing skills more often than listening and speaking skills and the students have little opportunity to practice English on a daily basis. These are some reasons why Thai students have low achievement in English (Punthumasen, 2007, p. 3), especially in listening and speaking skills.

In 1996, in preparation for the education reform, the Ministry of Education launched a new policy to teach English since Prathomsuksa 1 (Grade 1), and to use a learner - centered approach as the principle of teaching and learning for all subjects including English. In this curriculum, students in Prathomsuksa 1 - 4 (Grades 1 - 4) study English for 80 hours a year, and those in Prathomsuksa 5 - 6 (Grades 5 - 6) 200 hours a year (Sawaswadee, 1991 as cited in Prapaisit, 2003, p. 14). As for the curriculum of 1978, students studied English since Grade 5 and studied 600 periods a year, one hour was divided into 3 periods with 20 minutes for each period (Ministry of Education, 1997 as cited in Prapaisit, 2003, p. 15).

One of the purposes of teaching English with the new principle for all primary education levels (Grades 1 - 6) of the English curriculum of 1996 is that learners will be able to communicate correctly and appropriately (Prapaisit, 2003, pp. 16 - 17). In 1999, education reform began according to the National Education Act

(NEA) which enacted on 20 August 1999. The ultimate goal of reform is to develop Thai people (learners) to be good, competent and happy in order to live in harmony with other people in the society. Therefore, using language for communication is included in English subject's objective. And English teachers have to teach all four basic language skills to students: listening and reading, speaking and writing (Punthumasen, 2007).

Although the Ministry of Education has been spending great efforts and allocated a large budget to improve Thai students' proficiency in English, Thai students are still at a very low level of English proficiency (Punthumasen, 2007, p. 1). As shown in the results of the final examination of English language in primary and secondary levels between in academic year 2002 - 2004, which was organized by the Bureau of Education Testing, it revealed that the percentage of average scores decreased continuously every year (Punthumasen, 2007). Average scores of 6th graders were 49.56, 47.40, 41.17, and 37.34, respectively. Average scores of 9th graders were 38.95, 45.31, 37.90, and 32.26, respectively. And average scores of 12th graders in 2003 - 2004 were 39.41 and 32.45 respectively. The average scores of university entrance examination in English language in 2003 - 2004 were 40.12. Furthermore, the results of TOEIC (stands for Test of English for International Communication) examination in English listening and reading skills among ASEAN countries between the years 2004 - 2005 revealed that Thai candidates ranked fourth, lower than the Philippines, Singapore and Cambodia. (Punthumasen, 2007).

The British Council's English Language Teaching Profile: Thailand (1977 as cited in Cedar, 2004, pp. 20 - 21) concluded the causes of Thai students' low level of English proficiency as follows:

1. The inappropriateness of the school curriculum, where too much is covered too soon,
2. The failure of coordination among the great number of administrative institutions, departments and units,
3. The ineffectiveness of teaching and the poor physical condition of many schools,
4. The lack of oral tests in examinations,

5. The unsatisfactory inclusion of out - of - date textbooks in the approved list,
6. The old - fashioned examinations which deal with traditional grammar and composition,
7. The lack of opportunity and motivation among learners to use English with native speakers,
8. The “very great difficulty” of learning English due to its “very great linguistic contrast” with Thai,
9. Inertia, caused by a bureaucratic approach, which makes change at any level difficult, and
10. The inefficient way of allocating the English courses to teachers.

In addition, the information received from the 11th UNESCO – APEID International Conference Reinventing Higher Education: Toward Participatory and Sustainable Development which was held on 12 – 14 December, 2007 in Thailand, informed that Thailand has been facing problems related to the quality of teachers teaching English, shortage of direct field teachers, as well as using English as a medium of instruction which have resulted in low standard of English achievement of Thai students. It also revealed that Thai students have low performance in English because most of students think English is boring as they are not familiar with its subject matter, teaching methods are not attractive or engaging for students to learn, school’s environment does not facilitate students in practicing their English everyday, there are not enough attractive textbooks, novels and cartoons or materials in English which can engage the students’ interest in self - initiated learning, and there are not enough technology support for language learning, especially for schools in rural or remote areas (Punthumasen, 2007).

Although these problems of students’ low English proficiency have been stated for years, they have not been solved, especially regarding the shortcoming of oral tests and the focus on traditional grammar and composition examinations. This study would verify whether or not the English listening test designed by the researcher mirrors students’ English listening proficiency which was previously determined by a written National Test (NT).

Besides the students' poor English proficiency reported in UNESCO-APEID conference, the NT scores of Thai 6th graders in the academic year 2004 (Education Evaluation and Assessment Group, 2004), revealed that Thai 6th graders did the worst in the English subject among four - subject tests; Thai, Mathematics, Science, and English. When comparing the NT scores in the academic year 2004 with the academic year 2003, it was found that Thai 6th graders' NT scores in the English subject decreased while the scores in the other three subjects; Thai, Mathematics, and Science, increased. More evidence which uncovers a serious problem in English learning by Thais is the report of Thai students' poorer English proficiency than students in most neighboring countries. That is, Thais were ranked second from the last in English proficiency in Southeast Asia (Prapphal, 2001).

Moreover, Prapphal's (2001) study showed that Thai graduates' English proficiency was below the standard set by Chulalongkorn University. Among the three tested skills: listening, reading, and writing, both science graduates and non - science graduates did the worst on listening. These problems occur because English is rarely used in social intercourse of Thailand which is a predominantly - Thai - speaking society. They rarely have experience in English listening and speaking in real life, so listening skill should be emphasized at all levels of education.

The result mentioned above is consistent with the principles of learning and teaching English for primary education specified in the curriculum of 1996 which aims to focus on listening and speaking skills at the preparatory level (Grade 1 - 2); listening, speaking, reading, writing and spelling skills at the literacy level (Grade 3 - 4); as well as communicating in four skills at the beginner fundamental level (Grade 5 - 6) (Prapaisit, 2003, p. 17). Although the English curriculum emphasizes on every skill: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, English tests normally appear in reading and writing formats, not speaking and listening ones. Even though they consist of speaking and listening parts, they are tested in the form of written - only examinations. This example is seen in the National Test (NT). This is also prevalent in the English examination for entering each university. Therefore, the researcher wondered whether or not the results from these examinations can present students' genuine English listening achievement, and whether or not the students who get good grades in English would achieve high score in listening comprehension.

Many scholars share the same concern with English knowledge and performance. They have demonstrated inconsistencies between English knowledge and performance. For example, (Chomsky 1965 as cited in Hadley, 2001, p. 3) distinguished competence from performance. Competence refers to one's implicit or explicit knowledge of the system of the language and performance refers to one's actual production and comprehension of language in specific instances of language use; however, actual performance did not properly reflect the underlying knowledge (competence). In the same way, (Savignon 1997 as cited in Hadley, 2001, p. 4) defined competence as what one knows and performance as what one does. But only performance is observable, while competence can be developed, maintained, and evaluated through performance. However, Vandergrift (2006) found that second language (L2) proficiency contributed significantly to L2 listening comprehension proficiency. Vandergrift's study challenges the notion of the discrepancy between competence and performance (e.g., Chomsky, 1965 as cited in Hadley, 2001; Savignon, 1997 as cited in Hadley, 2001). These arguments lead to more studies on the relationship between L2 proficiency and L2 listening comprehension proficiency. However, there are a few studies concerned with the relationship between English knowledge and English listening, and they were conducted outside Thailand. Therefore, it was interesting to investigate the relationship of these two variables in Thailand.

The fundamental objective of this study was to examine the relationship between the level of students' overall English achievement, based on the NT score in the English subject, and their English listening performance. Moreover, it attempted to investigate the relationship between students' listening achievement and the types of text they heard. It was hoped that its results could benefit English teachers to develop their students' listening proficiency as well as to consider whether to increase English listening practice and tests in an English course.

To understand the nature of the relationship between L2 listening comprehension achievement and English achievement, the researcher examined the mediating role of each of these two variables in listener ability to answer each question type: monologue, sentence, conversation, and sign. The results regarding which type of question students could do the best and which ones they needed to do better will be

useful for an English teacher to use as a guideline for improving the students' listening skill in each question type.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions;

1. What is the students' overall English listening achievement?
2. What is the students' English listening achievement in each listening type?
3. Is there a relationship between students' overall English achievement, based on the NT score in English, and their English listening achievement, and if so, to what extent are the two variables linked?

Significance of the Study

It was hoped that the findings from this study would reveal the Thai students' genuine English listening achievement which is a fundamental aspect of effective verbal communication. The findings investigated the question; whether or not there is a relationship between students' overall English achievement and their listening achievement. Its results will be a guideline for English teachers to adjust the English courses to be compatible with the need of equal portions of the four English skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in the National Curriculum in order to reach the English communication goal. For instance, teachers can allow students to practice their listening skills in English class and insert a listening test part in the English test, etc. When students do not master enough English listening skill, they may face difficulty in verbal communication which eventually leads to communication breakdown.

Delimitation of the Study

This study investigated English listening achievement of 7th graders at Sa School, Nan Province, in the academic year 2006. The researcher chose to study this group because, like most schools in Thailand, Sa School is a school in a district where students rarely have an opportunity to communicate with foreigners. Therefore, it was interesting to verify students' listening achievement, the relationship of students'

listening achievement and their overall English achievement. In addition, the teachers as well as the students in this school voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. It is the researcher's former workplace; thus, it was convenient for the researcher to collect the data.

Limitations of the Study

There were four limitations considered in the current research study:

1. Other factors such as intelligence, motivation, learning strategies, gender, and experience are not considered.

2. Due to the limit of time in studying this research, the researcher employs the subjects' NT (National Test) scores in English, which mirrored the students' English achievement while they were at Grade 6. However, at the time of data collection the students were in the second semester of Grade 7. As a consequence, the findings from this study might receive some effects from English teaching during Grade 7.

3. Due to the fact that no other English standard tests which can mirror students' English achievement are officially accepted, the students' NT score in English was used in this study. Yet, there are differences between the characteristics of the NT and the listening achievement test in this study. That is, the first one was the written examination used to test students' overall English competence, and the latter test which was created by the researcher was used to test students' English listening performance.

Definition of Terms

For this study, the following terms used throughout the thesis were defined as follows.

1. Achievement Test is a test for assessment of instructional outcomes. It is directly related to language course, of which the purpose is to establish how successful individual students, groups of students, or the course itself have been in achieving objectives (Hughes, 1996, p. 10). Two tests, the National Test and the listening test, which were cited in this study are considered achievement tests.

2. English as a Foreign Language (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 in the country (e.g., in government, or business)

3. Grade refers to the level of obligatory study at school. There are 12 grades in Thailand education system: 6 for the elementary level (Prathomsuksa), and 6 for the secondary level (Mathayomsuksa). For example, Grade 3 refers to Prathomsuksa 3, Grade 6 refers to Prathomsuksa 6, Grade 7 refers to Muthayomsuksa 1, Grade 9 refers to Muthayomsuksa 3, and Grade 12 refers to Muthayomsuksa 6. For worldwide equivalence, the term "Grade" will be used throughout this thesis.

4. Listening criterion benchmark means criterion levels used as benchmarks for students' levels of English listening achievement according to objectives and levels of the language (Wongsothorn, 2001, as cited in Sreejai, 2004, p. 48) in percentage scores:

- 80 - 100 % means excellent.
- 70 - 79 % means good.
- 60 - 69 % means moderate.
- 50 - 59 % means fair.
- 0 - 49 % means need to improve.

5. National Test (NT) refers to the written standard overall achievement test of Thailand which is used to evaluate the students' general achievement in major subjects. It is designed by the Bureau of Education Testing of the Office of the Basic Education Commission. It is tested with the students in Prathomsuksa 3 (Grade 3), Prathomsuksa 6 (Grade 6), Mathayomsuksa 3 (Grade 9), and Mathayomsuksa 6 (Grade 12). In this study the students' NT score in English means the students' NT score in English in the academic year 2005.

6. Performance refers to one's actual production and comprehension of language in specific instances of language use (Chomsky, 1965 as cited in Hadley, 2001, p. 3).