CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The methodology for eliciting oral production from second language (L2) learners is an area that needs further investigation. Many researchers continually collect and study oral data in order to address a number of issues related to L2 acquisition and it is only recently that applied linguistics, teachers, researchers and curriculum developers in Thailand have innovated the methodology in order to promote English language learning to Thai students.

In Thailand, grammar teaching seems to be the most important aspect in English teaching and learning. Therefore students who study English in a traditional Thai style can never be free from a grammar structure that they have been learning for years. Certainly, these students are often nervous and self-conscious about speaking in English. Perhap, this is one of the reasons why Thai students are so shy about speaking English. This should not happen in any language classroom in the future, the students should feel more secure and be able to talk in English freely. For example, there are some students who have been studying English for more than ten years under both Thai and English curriculums. As well as spending each summer abroad for more than three years, their English should have improved from those experiences. However, still it is very difficult for them to communicate with native speakers.

All the time, they are aware of their mistakes, but in order to carry on a conversation, their mistakes do not appear to be a big issue, because they do not cause any communication breakdown. However, by experiencing the different learning styles and experiences living abroad, they are more confident and have become actively involved in class activities, which are different from what they have been taught in school many years ago.

There are many theories of second language acquisition which claimed that understanding what the teachers and interlocutors have said was important for acquisition (the Input Hypothesis of Krashen, 1980). In contrast, many researchers in the area have argued that comprehensible input is not enough for learners to develop their second language (Gregg, 1984; Long, 1992; Swain, 1985; White, 1987). The purpose of this study is to investigate issues relating to language output; the interactional discourse functions (IDF) of Thai undergraduates in a communicative task. The areas of interest in this study are as follows:

- The variation in interactional discourse functions that will provide opportunities for more talk or more communication.
- Amount and difference in the amount of interactional functions and overall amount of talk produced by students.

1.1 Overview of English language learning and teaching in Thailand

We shall begin with the context of the study and an overview of language teaching in Thailand. A discussion of the typical English classroom is then provided, followed by a discussion of how the study is significant to language teaching and language learning and the aims of the study with a list of the research questions. This chapter concludes the organization of this thesis.

We are in the era of globalization together with liberalization of trade in goods and services which opens up opportunities as well as threats, and added effects on our economy, business and society. Thai education is no exception. Since Thailand aims to be a part of the global community, knowledge of English, particularly proficiency in it, becomes increasingly important. The National Education Act of 1999 increased demands of educational reform that have led to pressure for changes in education in Thailand over recent years. The terms "learner-centered" and "innovation" have become talking points among national leaders, educators, teachers and even parents throughout the country. The trends towards new and innovative English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula have been encouraged in Thailand since the late 1990s.

A number of Thai universities have expressed concern about existing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs and have made great attempts to promote more effective EFL curriculum. The Communicative teaching approach and task-based learning (TBL) are the innovations most often chosen for the development of

students throughout the nation. These approaches will give students more opportunities to use the language to communicate with others effectively. Willis (1996) suggests that English teachers should use the TBL approach in their classroom. TBL can help teachers to focus on meaning as well as form. In addition, students will have more opportunities to use language when given a real world task.

In Thailand, grammar teaching often takes the form of presenting and practicing isolated rules, and paradigms of manipulating form rather than relating form to function. Based on informal interviews with Thai students who have been studying English for more than 12 years and with experienced Thai teachers, it was found that grammar rules and vocabulary are still widely presented in Thai classrooms in isolation. The students have to memorize rules and vocabulary by doing exercises in order to pass examinations. They do not have a chance to learn the rules through interactions. For example, students learn only the structure rules of tenses, but they do not have a chance to learn how each tense can be applied to communication in their daily lives. This means communication and interaction among students rarely appears in Thai classroom.

The Ministry of Education (2003) has stated that according to Thai Educational Reform, English language teaching should place an emphasis on language for communication, with student-centered learning being promoted in all classrooms nation wide. The aim is that students not only remember vocabulary and language structures, but they can also use language to communicate with other people efficiently. In other words, students should not only learn the English language as system, but they have to learn it as a tool for communication as well.

4

The Ministry of Education (2002) stated:

"There is an urgent need for finding new ways of teaching EFL in Thailand.
To implement Communicative Language Teaching successfully in Thailand
requires relinquishing of the traditional "power" teachers have over their
students. Also, the problems in teaching processes which did not develop
students in accordance with the standards of Thai economic and social
policy".

In order to determine the number of opportunities for students to communicate and talk more in class and respond to the problems mentioned, teachers are now implementing new curricula and have to change from traditional roles to more creative and innovative ones. Therefore, the option in teaching language is to provide and implement various activities into classes. The activities designed by teachers should aim to develop students' accuracy as well as fluency and to let students find their own language learning strategies. It is believed that this will lead to learner independence and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2003).

To conclude, the methodology for eliciting oral production from second language (L2) learners, especially of those in Thai classroom is an area that warrants further investigation. Therefore, the researcher seeks to study the recorded conversation of student pairs, with the focus on the matter of task effect on student oral production, which is being overlooked by Thai teacher-researchers.

1.1.1 Statement of the Problem

In recent years, researchers such as Long, Gass, Veronis, Duff, Phrabu, and especially Pica (cited in Cloutier, 1999: 4-19) have investigated in the area of communicative tasks, claimed that communicative tasks have been developed to provide an environment allowing language learners to engage themselves in meaningful activities, such as information- gap tasks, problem- solving tasks, jigsaw tasks, decision- making tasks and opinion- exchange tasks. In addition, for learners to be able to learn the language, as Long (1980) cited in Cloutier (1999:6) explains that the best way to learn English is through interaction. Such interaction gives an opportunity for incomprehensible input and output to become comprehensible through negotiation.

The number of published studies in the 1990s by Pica, Holliday, Lewis, Berducci and Newman (1990, 1991), Duff (1993), Kumaravedivelu (1993), Long and Crooks (1993), Nunan (1993), Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993), Gass (1997), Swain and Lapkin (1998) have recognized how different tasks affect the language produced by learners.

However, none of the above studies answered the question of whether certain types of tasks are effective at generating negotiation, which in turn facilitates student learning. In addition, communicative learning may be difficult to implement with Thai students who are accustomed to traditional types of classroom learning and who may be resistant to innovation. Also, most Thai English instructors, are still far

behind in the concept, or if they know the concept but never adapt it in their classroom.

Moreover, the findings of the previous researchers like Pica, Holliday and Lewis (1990), Berducci and Newman (1990, 1991), Duff (1993), Kumaravedivelu (1993), Long and Crooks (1993), Nunan (1993), Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993), Gass (1997), Swain and Lapkin (1998), stimulated the researcher interests because all studies compared interaction on different task-types. Such researches are limited to the number of occurrences of interactional discourse functions (i.e., comprehension-check, confirmation-check, etc.) which in turn can determine the number of opportunities for negotiation. Also, such researches failed to give information on discourse produced by the participants. In the present study, the varying functions served by IDF on the task are analyzed, together with the length of turns that most previous studies do not address. The attempts are made in the present study to examine the information-gap task to see if it will be conducive to greater amounts of overall of talk when compared with the language produced by the student-pairs.

Therefore, the present study not only looks at ways in which Non Native Speakers (NNS) signal difficulty in understanding and respond when asked by other NNS to clarify or confirm what they have said in order to carry out a task, it also attempts to show that this task can provide a greater amount of talk. A greater overall amount of talk, in turn, allows for learners to engage in more complex language production in the second language learning.

1.2 Aims of the study

This study has three major aims.

1. The overall aim is to find more conclusive evidence of whether information-gap tasks enhance a student's learning.

2. The second aim is to examine how an information-gap task affects the IDF and the length of utterances.

3. The third aim is to determine whether information-gap tasks are an effective method to elicit student interaction.

These aims are restated below as research questions.

1.2.1 Research Questions

This study will examine the IDF initiated by the student pairs as well as the length of turns, which most previous studies do not address.

The first research question concerns the difference in numbers of IDF (i.e. backchannel-cues, clarification-requests, comprehension-checks, confirmation-checks, echoes, lexical uncertainties, paraphrases, referential –questions, self-repetitions, and sentence-completions) which will be generated in an information gap task.

The main research question that guides the study is as follows:

(1) What is the number and distribution of interactional discourse functions generated in the task?

The subsidiary research question is as follows:

(2) How much variation is there between student pairs in the total amount of talk generated in an information-gap task?

This research question deals with differences in the total amount of language produced on the task, in terms of turns, words, and words-per-turn. Taken together, these variables are called "overall amount of talk". Therefore, to answer the general questions of whether there are any quantitative or qualitative differences between the student-pairs in the discourse generated by an information gap task. The quantitative analysis will involve measuring (1) "interactional discourse functions (IDF) ", which will be obtained by calculating the total values of the ten interactional functions (see list of IDF in Chapter 3) and (2) "overall amount of talk" by calculating the number of words and turns, from which the researcher will obtain the measure of words-per-turn (or length of turn).

1.2.2 Significance of the study

Traditionally, language learning has been viewed as a syllabus of structures which presents a series of 'ready-to-learn lessons' arranged from easy to difficult. Fluency and accuracy are the ultimate goals of this type of learning (Foster, 1999). In contrast, communicative tasks have been developed to provide an environment allowing language learners to engage themselves in meaningful activities, such as information- gap tasks, problem- solving tasks, jigsaw tasks. Therefore, learners acquire the target language through a more natural process by communicative tasks (Ellis, 1994).

Ellis (2003) also stated that:

"They encourage students to participate within their groups and interact with their peers and teachers. They can promote communication among the students, so the students practice their speaking skills".

Therefore, in terms of classroom practice, this means that educators should introduce such activities as information-gap, problem solving, decision-making, opinion exchange, picture dictation and jigsaw tasks. These types of activities provide an ideal atmosphere for negotiation of meaning in appropriate contexts. Through them, learners have opportunities to receive input that they have made comprehensible through negotiation and at the same time, to produce comprehensible

output, an output which they have made comprehensible to other learners through negotiation.

The researcher expected the following benefits from this research.

1. The information gleaned from this study could be helpful to teachers, learners, and researchers of language learning and teaching. Therefore, the teachers will discover what types of tasks are suitable to use in class in order to encourage their students to communicate effectively, and be able to plan for classroom activities. As for the researcher and curriculum developers, they could implement the methodology in creating a better curriculum for students.

2. English teachers can gain insight into what kind of activities are effective or ineffective for their students. One class may differ · from other class, therefore for learning and teaching to take place, the teacher should know which activity is best for his or her class.

3. They can also read this study to reflect on their teaching and raise their own awareness of how they should take tasks into consideration for classroom teaching.

11

1.3 Definition of Terms

In this study various terms that need to be addressed are defined as follows:

Collaborative learning

An approach to teaching and learning which makes use of learners working together in a small group, in which specific roles and responsibilities are assured by individuals.

Discourse

Language which has been produced for communication purposes. The language that the student-pairs produced in an information gap task.

Interlanguage

Interlanguage is the type of language produced by second or foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. These learners learning language by several different processes, such as borrowing patterns from the mother tongue, extending patterns from the target language, and expressing meaning using the words and grammar rules which were already known. In this study the term refers to language which learners produce using these processes.

Interactional Functions

According to Halliday, a young child in the early stages of language development is able to master a number of elementary functions of language. He

12

distinguished seven initial functions: Instrumental, Regulatory, Interactional, Personal, Heuristic, imaginative, and Informative. At about 18 months, the child is beginning to master the adult's system of communication, including grammar, vocabulary and meaning components.

Interactional context

Interactional context in this thesis refers to the context in which interaction occurs when the student-pairs interact and negotiate with each other for communicative purposes. As well as the linguistic environment, situation, participation, medium and so on.

Move

In discourse analysis there are moves and turns of discourse. In this study, there are numbers of moves and turns produced by the students. For, example, *that's right, ... or OK OK I see.*

1.4 Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The present chapter contains an overview of the context of this study. Chapter Two reviews research on task-based learning, as well as the rationale for the current study and examines the limitations of previous research concerning the pedagogical efficacy of differing task-types. Chapter Three presents the methodology of this study which includes the explanation of the data collection, the data collection procedure, and data analysis. Chapter Four shows the results of data analysis and provides explanations for understanding the statistical data. Chapters Five concludes the findings, discusses the implications of the findings, provides suggestions and points out limitations of this study and gives some suggestions for the directions of future research.