

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The need for this study arose from the widespread claim that many Thai learners of EFL do not write grammatically correct English or speak English in manners consistent with the structure and conventions of contemporary English in spontaneous communication, even after many years of learning English grammar explicitly. Chaturon (2005) posits that, most students' inability to communicate in English despite spending years learning the language points to a clear failure in English teaching in Thailand. It has become a matter of concern that a cognitive system that has engendered some level of accuracy and fluency for learners elsewhere (Purpura, 2004) has been seen unable to generate same for Thai learners. This is different from the position of the literature which is awash with evidence that explicit grammatical instruction in English as a Foreign Language-----if properly implemented-----could aid learners' accuracy and fluency (see R. Ellis 2002a, 2002b; Spada1997; Larsen Freeman, 2003).

Schmidt (2001) declares that instruction and attention are "...necessary in order to understand virtually every aspect of second language acquisition (SLA) including... L2 fluency..." (p. 3). Explicit instruction translates to implicit knowledge (comprehension and oral production) when learners receive communicative exposure to grammar points introduced through formal instruction. Learners also benefit when the grammar instruction is extensive and is sustained over a long period of time. Such instruction contributes to the development of implicit knowledge as measured by performance on production tasks (Dekeyser, 1994; Doff, 2000). In the same vein, a fairly sound knowledge of grammar may help learners perform some communicative activities, without which the performance appears to be very difficult, and it may help them to overcome gaps while communicating (Terrell, 1991).

There have been debates in the field of cognitive psychology over the role of explicit versus implicit learning. The issue of whether learning occurs primarily through conscious manipulation of information or through an unconscious one when learners receive instruction has been controversial (N. Ellis, 1994; Reber, 1967; Bialystok, 1990, 1994). In consequence, explicit grammar teaching has in the distant and recent past, been downplayed and regarded as marginally relevant to language learning (Krashen, 1981). There have been arguments tailored along the line that if L1 learners do not require formal instruction to learn languages, L2 learners should neither need it (Zobl, 1995; Schwartz, 1993). It is claimed that explicit grammatical instruction only marginally or peripherally helps learners write correctly, but that it does not aid

speaking or oral production of English correctly. In the context of Universal Grammar and its application to SLA, similar claims have been made, arguing that, if UG is available to L2 learners as it is available in L1 learning, L2 learning should not be dependent on instruction (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Schwartz, 1993; Cook, 1991).

However, recent research has demonstrated the need for learners' exposure to explicit grammar instruction to attain high accuracy and fluency levels. Research shows that learners who will benefit in this way are expected to have opportunities to encounter and produce learned structures or rules which have been formally introduced through consistent or frequent exposure (R.Ellis 2001, 2002b; Swain, 1985). The inability of EFL learners in Thailand to translate accuracy into fluency calls for a critical review of the way English grammar is taught in Thailand. It appears nearly tragic, if learners acquire accuracy through studying the structures and rules of a language but lack the wherewithal or ability to deploy the same rules for making clear intelligible and fairly fluent speech in the same language.

This throws up questions of the implementation of the explicit teaching approach, such as: how do classroom teachers perceive this failure? How do Thailand-based EFL teachers approach the teaching of grammar topics, forms and structures? What classroom practices have they mostly employed in teaching grammar? Have teachers been idiosyncratic in the use and implementation of explicit grammar instruction, knowing that it is a concept and theory whose pedagogic success depends on implementation that is consistent with theories and research findings? Borg (1998) declares that "... the teaching of grammar in the absence of well-founded guidelines is like a landscape without bearings" (p. 10). Is it possible to improve on explicit grammatical instruction practices in EFL classrooms to a point where it will be useful for both fluency and accuracy as enunciated in the literature? Why is spoken communication in English difficult for learners? If explicit grammar teaching engenders accuracy for the Thai learner of English, why does it not generate fluency for the same person? How would practicing EFL teachers in Thailand schools evaluate the performance or suitability of explicit grammar instruction in grammar teaching in the country? What are their suggestions, agenda and blueprint for teaching grammar in the future for effective fluency and accuracy? These concerns about learning grammar are addressed in this study.

It may be appropriate to believe that explicit grammar principles involve certain characteristic qualities which make it different from other grammar-teaching approaches. It would therefore seem right to implement the critical stages in the process of teaching grammar explicitly. If the appropriate stages are not implemented, it may result in situations where learners understand the lesson in part. Kagan (1992) thinks it disagreeable when "...teachers create and internalize their own maps", (p. 80). As such, the benefits or results that normally accrue from 'whole' implementation may be reaped in half measure, such as resulting in ability for only accuracy but not fluency, or in general confusion and frustration for learners.

There has been heated but inconclusive argument in language-teaching circles over decades in seeking truly beneficial grammar-teaching methods, between exponents of explicit grammatical instruction on the one hand and those of other methods of teaching the grammar of English, on the other hand (Moumene, 2007; Ellis, 2006). Much research has been carried out previously on both sides and there seems to be no consensus on the issue.

To enable our understanding of how explicit grammatical instruction is implemented in Thailand schools, Auxiliary Verb-related grammar lessons will be observed in schools. These auxiliary verbs include: *Be*---and its variants: *been, being, is, are, were, am* and *was*; *has, have* and *had*; *do, does* and *did*. These are as primary auxiliary verbs. Modal auxiliary verbs, (also termed secondary auxiliaries) including *will-would, may-might, shall-should, can-could, must, need, dare* and *ought to* are in addition, chosen to illustrate how teachers in Thailand teach grammar explicitly. Auxiliary verbs seem difficult for Thais to understand and use in their spoken or written English probably because there are no auxiliary verbs in Thai (Svalberg & Chu, 1998; Hinkel, 1992; Smyth, 2001). Unlike native speakers of English who use primary auxiliary verbs correctly without effort or having to formally learn them (Chomsky, 1968; Shaughnessy, 1977), Thai speakers may struggle to construct grammatically correct sentences with the aforementioned primary and secondary auxiliary verbs, as a result of problems encountered in the many areas of their use, including how and when to use *been* and *being*; how to deal with the subjunctive *were*----as different from *were* as the plural, past-form (of *are*) auxiliary verb; how to determine verbs (other auxiliaries) that collocate with each variant of *be*; determining the structural positioning of *been* and *being* ----whether in the initial, medial or final position of a sentence, as in:

(a) *Been* a good teacher, he was praised by his students.

(b) *Being* a good teacher, he was praised by his students.

Other issues include the difficulties associated with the verbs that come after *is/was/are/were/am* (Metcalf & Astle, 2005). There may also be lack of confidence in the choice of tense to follow *be* and its variants----should the verb be in the perfect or progressive tense, for example:

- He was *beating yesterday*,

Or, should the verb be in the past participle tense, after *Was*, as in:

- He was *beaten yesterday*.

Also of perceived difficulty is the dilemma over the involvement of these verbs in the construction of active voice and passive voice and the attendant complexity for language learners. Determining the appropriate pronunciation of *been* and *being*, which are usually confused, appears difficult for an average learner of English. Of possible, equally great difficulty is the confusion over choice between *is/was/are/were/am* (on the one hand) and *has/ have* and *had* (on the other), in relation to *Being*. For example, will the learner say:

- She *has* being congratulated,

Or,

- She *is* being congratulated.

Secondly, auxiliary verbs are chosen to exemplify the implemented of explicit grammatical instruction in schools because the verbs are frequently used in common sentences. They are some of the twenty commonest words in English and they are used in almost all discourse types on a daily basis (Swan, 2005). Hardly will anyone make three sentences without having recourse to at least one of the words constituting what is known as primary and secondary auxiliary verbs. This portends a problem that need be solved through research into how best the unfamiliar structures and forms of English (such as auxiliary verbs) can be taught Thai learners, in a manner that will excite or interest them, encouraging them to learn, understand and communicate in them orally in daily conversations as well as in writing (Florio & Frank 1982). Exemplifying with auxiliary verbs gives an opportunity to see, through the 'lens' of this topic, how teachers implement explicit grammar instruction or other grammar forms, structures or topics in their classrooms.

## 1.2 Aim of the Study

Thousands of learners who may have passed through studies in English grammar and who have truly learnt and understood basic English structures in Thailand are said to have poor oral communication skills. It is the aim of this study to find out the quality of explicit grammatical instruction learners have been exposed to in Thailand. This study will find out the steps taken by each participant-teacher in the study in teaching grammar in the explicit grammatical fashion. Since the aim of almost every EFL teacher is to see his or her students write and speak good English, each such teacher is expected to go the whole extent in making the teaching count for both accuracy and fluency through painstaking implementation of the processes which research findings believe will deliver great results.

The purpose of this research therefore, is to find out if lack of accuracy and fluency of learners has anything to do with the implementation of grammar lessons. Each participant-teacher's pedagogic methodology will be studied vis-à-vis research theories, credible hypotheses or literature recommendations so as to understand how teachers carry out explicit grammar instruction. Knowing this may enable this study draw appropriate conclusions. One main question has been posed as guide for this study:

Do teachers of EFL in Thailand implement the critical stages of the explicit grammatical instruction theory as obtained in the literature or recommended by research, in their grammar lessons?

## 1.3 Scope of the Study

This research will focus on the issue of grammar teaching, by surveying the implementation procedures of explicit grammatical instruction employed by an array of selected EFL teachers in Thailand. It will examine implementation based on the teaching of auxiliary verbs alone, and which include: *Be-* --and its variants: *been, being, is, are, were, am* and *was*; *has, have* and *had*; *do, does* and *did* ---as primary auxiliary verbs. Other auxiliary verbs include *will-would, may-might, shall-should, can-could, must, need, dare* and *ought to*. These are secondary auxiliary verbs.

It is important to point out at this juncture that this study does not address the problem of taciturnity and reticence of EFL learners within or outside Thailand classrooms in relation to speaking English since different factors may be responsible for reticence possibly including social, cultural, psychological, neurological, congenital, neurobiological or even personality make-up factors. Instead, the study concentrated on learners of English grammar who receive explicit grammar instruction; who are willing and potentially able to communicate (and are not reticent) but cannot be said to be both accurate and fluent after reasonable periods of exposure to explicit grammatical instruction in English. This study will be guided in scope by the research questions. It is not limited to investigation with only Thai teachers but the evaluation of the implementation of explicit grammar instruction will be carried out with EFL teachers of all nationalities based in Thailand, who fall in the category of participants in this study.

Secondly, the study, though relating to grammatical structures in general, will be limited in investigation to the workability of explicit grammar teaching, in regard only to auxiliary verbs as listed above. However, should a participant-teacher be found implementing explicit grammar instruction with a structure or form similar or related to auxiliary verbs, and if the circumstances of such a lesson offer potential insights into the aim of this study, such a lesson or circumstance of instruction will not be ignored but made to count towards this evaluation.

Finally, this study will afford a fairly convenient opportunity to examine a few controversial issues about grammar teaching and take a stance with a view to developing (mostly) teachers' awareness of pedagogical possibilities under the explicit grammatical dispensation and discuss current research trends.

#### 1.4 Definition of Terms

The following are terms used in this paper:

##### Explicit Grammar Teaching

Explicit grammar teaching as used in this study is the means by which grammatical structures, forms, or topics are identified, isolated for pedagogic purposes, broken down by grammatical analysis from a possible complex structure form to surface-level structure, and involving the formulation of rules before or after examples (depending on whether it is an inductive or deductive-approach option), and which is followed by a plethora of examples, illustrations, practice, production and communicative tasks, interactional feedback and assessment (Ur 1988; Dekeyser 1994; R. Ellis, 1995; VanPatten 1993, 1996, 2002).

##### 'Other Grammar Teaching Methods'

When 'other grammar teaching methods' is used in this study, it will refer to any method of teaching English grammar different from the 'explicit' grammar teaching method (in its complete sense).

## Auxiliary Verbs

These are a set of words in the Verbal Group which are not main, lexical or principal verbs (such as *speak, write and dance*) and this set includes *Be*, and its variants: *Is, Was, Are, Were, Am, Being and Been; has, have and had; do, does and did* -----as primary auxiliary verbs and modal auxiliary verbs, (also called secondary auxiliary verbs) including *will-would, may-might, shall-should, can-could, must, need, dare and ought to*. Thornbury (2006) holds that primary auxiliary verbs like “...*be, do and have* ...serve to express aspect and voice (i.e. active and passive) ...and change their form according to tense, number and person” (p.22).

## 1. 5 Significance of the Study.

Some people believe that grammar teaching is of marginal benefits to the learner (Krashen, 1982), while others think that it is important but should be taught implicitly, or explicitly. As should be expected, exponents and apologists of the explicit teaching persuasion contend that explicit grammar teaching is effective. This present research is not constructed as a debate to find out what the best method is but it is an attempt to investigate why EFL learners in Thailand do not perform really well in English oral communication having studied English grammar explicitly. Though the usefulness of a particular study to a classroom teacher is not necessarily determined by the study's orientation to theory and the theoretical value of its findings (Chilcot, 1987; Calkins, 1985), at the end of this study, it will have been fairly seen, what is to be adjusted in the pedagogical calculation of teachers to make room for learners' improvement and teachers' development since grammar teaching requires good Knowledge About Language (Wray, 1993). It helps the teachers examine their personal pedagogic belief systems which influence the extent a teacher can go to achieve set objectives (Clarke & Peterson, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992).

In addition, it will show how much grammar knowledge teachers of grammar have and use in their lessons in fulfillment of proper implementation of standard practice. (Ellis, 1994; Bygate, Tonkyn & Williams, 1994).

Further, it will have been seen if explicit grammatical instruction agrees with Thailand EFL learners particularly, since different teaching methods may work for different sets of learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Findings will also show whether it is acceptable or not to teachers. For both teachers and learners, grammar instruction and knowledge are important. (Azar, 2007; Mulroy, 2003; Canale & Swain, 1980).

## 1.6 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The present chapter introduces the need for carrying out the evaluation of explicit grammatical instruction, the aim and significance of the study.

Chapter two critically examines the theoretical bases for the implementation of explicit grammatical instruction. The literature affords this study illumination into researched

epistemology of explicit grammatical pedagogy and its benefits to the learning community if well implemented.

In chapter three, the methodology of this study is discussed: the research design, the methods used in conducting it which include the context of the investigation, the participants, the data collection instruments and the data collection plan, strategy and procedure adopted.

Chapter four lays out the three-phase data collected: the first, second and third. It also provides an analysis and interpretation of the data.

Chapter five focuses on implications of the findings for teaching and learning as well as the disparity between theory and practice. It also evaluates the study and offers recommendations.

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