

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Rationale and Significance of the Problem

Thailand is a rapidly developing country located in Southeast Asia where the national language spoken is Thai, which exhibits the pride of Thai people by having never been colonized (Wiriyachitra, 2002). However, as Wiriyachitra suggests, English plays a large role in the everyday lives of Thais. Thailand currently has no official second language, but English is currently the most widely taught foreign language in schools, and the Thai Ministry of Education mandates it beginning at the primary level (Ministry of Education, 2006).

In addition, English is widely used in other sectors as well. The development of the country has seen an increase of outside investors in the business, education, science, and technological fields where English is the medium for communication (Wiriyachitra, 2002). Foley (2005) lists English as being widely used in international organizations, banking, advertising, tourism, tertiary media outlets, international air travel, international law, international safety, and so forth. Tourism is included in his features, but one could also argue that the majority of those domains reflect the tourism industry. For example, in order to increase tourism you need creative English mediums in the form of advertising and promotion. The use of English for international safety, and within the airline industry, reflects the tourism industry and desires of most tourism students to work in the airline industry, or marine industry in Southern Thailand, to transport tourists from one destination to the next, or to work in the scuba diving industry.

However, Wiriyachitra (2002) suggests from personal experiences, and limited research, that Thai universities are unable to produce graduates with English skills adequate for the workplace, especially the tourism industry. She cites a possible reason for this outcome may be that speaking and listening, the most common skills, are not the main focus of Thai curriculum at the tertiary level. Mrs. Arunsi Sastramitri, Director of the Academic Training Section of the Tourist Authority of Thailand, (cited in Wiriyachitra, 2002) observed that tourism is a major industry in Thailand, but Thai graduates in the tourism field have sub-par English skills, and that this creates misunderstandings and a negative attitude towards Thailand.

English exists in Thailand, as do courses catering to the needs of students pursuing a tourism career. However, there are few public evaluations of English courses, specifically English for Specific Purposes (ESP), available to current or future instructors in the field. If courses are not being evaluated, the profession cannot grow and ensure the learners' needs are met; or that the target language being taught is relative to the language faced in everyday situations. Tourism in Thailand is likely to continue to increase along with the import and export industry, in part due to the proposed addition of a high-speed railway linking northern Thailand to China and

Laos. As tourism likely continues to increase, and Thailand continues to develop as a leader in South East Asia, it is imperative that current tourism programs are being evaluated and redesigned to meet the growing demand of English speakers in the Thai tourism industry.

As the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) continues to grow, China, Thailand, and Laos have agreed to build a high-speed railway linking all three countries in association with the ASEAN-China free trade agreement that became affective in January 2011 (Asean-China Free Trade Area, 2010). The development of the high-speed railway is likely to further increase the need for English, especially in the north of Thailand, as trade and tourism will likely increase between the three countries. The operation of the high-speed railway will create a need for transportation workers and the industry is most likely to pursue graduates with a high level of English in relation to the tourism and transportation fields. The focus on transportation will create a need for more ESP courses.

However, neither English nor ESP courses are new to Thailand; they have been a part of Thailand for over forty years (Foley, 2005). In respect to ESP programs, tourism is one of the most widely taught curriculums in Thai universities (Sinhaneti, 1994). However, little evaluation of current ESP tourism programs in Thailand currently exists. Without evaluating current language programs, change in curriculum cannot be possible, and programs will continue as they always have instead of being adapted to meet the current demands of the Thai tourism industry.

ESP programs in Thailand will remain and likely increase in number. This is especially true for the north of Thailand, as it becomes a transportation hub for foreign tourists and business professionals, who will likely utilize the high-speed rail linking Thailand, China, and Laos. The evaluation of current programs is a necessity in order to provide educators the opportunity to investigate their classrooms, as well as restructure programs, or modify courses in order to keep up with the nationwide changes that demonstrate “English is no longer a luxury but a necessity” (Foley, 2005: 233). This research takes on Foley’s point of view as an effort to promote evaluation in tertiary tourism programs, and to demonstrate the effectiveness it has on discovering different aspects in a program with the aim to improve or modify it in the future.

1.2 Research Purpose

The research purpose is to evaluate the initial English for Tourism program directed toward fourth year tertiary level students at an international college in the north of Thailand.

1.3 Research Questions

These research questions were designed to meet this research’s goal and the conclusions are discussed in Chapter 5 of this report.

- 1) How did the learners and the administration respond to the English for Tourism program?
- 2) How did the instructor’s contributions to the program interact with the learners’ learning experience?

3) To what extent did the classroom materials, activities, and content assist in the interaction and communication amongst the learners during the program?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Evaluation as defined by Kiely and Rea-Dickens (2005) is the process of determining the relationship between different program mechanisms, the procedures and theory constructed by the individuals involved in a program, and the outcomes which are used to demonstrate the worth of a program. The use of evaluation in programs is widely suggested as an integral part of program development (Brown, 1995; Graves, 2000; Kiely & Rea-Dickens, 2005; Rae-Dickens & Germaine, 1993; Richards, 2001). However, as suggested by van de Poel and Gasiorek (2009:1) evaluation “is a critical but frequently underutilized part of the language course development process.” Rea-Dickens (1994: 84) goes further to suggest that “if evaluation in English language teaching (ELT) is to be effective, we will see stronger integration of evaluation within practice, as part of an individual’s professionalism.” The acknowledgement of the importance of language program evaluation is paramount in the profession, but evaluative research reporting may not be indicative of this acknowledgement, especially concerning language programs in Thailand. This research hopes to add valuable evaluation literature to signify the importance of evaluating current programs in order to restructure, or revise them to ensure Thai learners are being equipped with the proper English skills necessary to pursue work in the Thai tourism industry. The need for reliable research concerning tourism classes in the north of Thailand is instrumental, as Thailand continues to grow economically, and is an active member in ASEAN, which recognizes English as its official language (Chalermphanupap, 1999).

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study investigated English as a foreign language (EFL) students enrolled in an international program in a university in the north of Thailand. The course description is “a practice in language skills and expressions used in the tourism industry, both domestic and international. Spoken and written expressions in various situations such as dealing with complaints, precautions, etc. are included.” The research only evaluated this specific course and the learners and stakeholders involved in the program.

This research took place in an ESP classroom at the university and the results are representative of the fifteen students enrolled in the course, the instructor of the course, and the two administrators at the university. In addition, the scope of the contents included materials, activities, and topic. Furthermore, the procedures and theory used throughout the course were evaluated to demonstrate the significance of the outcomes in the program.

The data collected is only a reflection of this population and content. This study may have general characteristics of previous ESP courses in different contexts or may possibly be modified to meet the needs of other ESP language programs in different settings. However, the purpose of this research is to evaluate a fourth-year English for Tourism program within a northern Thai university context utilizing the Use-Driven and Participatory Process Model, and only takes into account the

experience of the instructor, learners, and two major stakeholders, in addition to the content.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

English for Tourism: An ESP program utilized to develop the four language skills of the learners with an emphasis on the tourism industry.

Evaluation: The process of determining the relationship between different program mechanisms, the procedures and theory constructed by the individuals involved in a program, and the outcomes which are used to demonstrate the worth of program (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005).

Formative Evaluation: A process evaluation that identifies problems within a program and to recognize aspects that are thriving or not reaching expectations within the language program.

Summative Evaluation: A cumulative evaluation that determines the overall effectiveness of a language program.

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