Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Rationale and Statement of the Problem

For several decades English has been a compulsory foreign language subject at various education levels in Thailand. As the Thai government has implemented new goals and objectives for the educational system, the starting age for compulsory English language learning (ELL) has been lowered to where it stands today--age six or level one in primary education. Thai students are now required to study English as a foreign language (EFL) for the majority of their school years, yet the proficiency of Thai students continues to be ranked low when compared to their Southeast Asian neighbors and other countries around the world (Ahuja, 2011; Wiriyachitra, 2002).

According to an article released by the Reuters News Service, the Swiss-based Institute of Management Development ranked Thailand 54th out of 56 countries globally for English proficiency (Ahuja, 2011). Without a large population of proficient English speakers, Thailand may lose jobs to other countries such as Taiwan, China, and Singapore who have the highly trained, skilled workers who are proficient in English as well. Some might think that there is a lack of proper funding for Thai education, but relative to its size Thailand is one of the world's top spenders when it comes to education spending 4.1% of its gross domestic product compared to Singapore's 3.0% (Ahuja, 2011; Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). Incidentally, Singapore outperforms Thailand in both English proficiency and overall education outcomes (Ahuja, 2011; Education First, 2011).

The disparity between Thailand's ELL outcomes and those of its Southeast Asian neighbors might create an interest into the causes of such differences. According to Gardner (1985) wondering why some students attain higher levels of proficiency than others is not a new question. He writes that teachers in general are not looking at the lack of proficiency as a failure, but they are re-focusing their efforts on their students and their language as a whole not merely from an educational viewpoint. They are focusing on other aspects of the language such as its history and relation to culture. This shift in focus toward the students themselves brought about a move toward social psychology and allowed for research into individual differences (ID) which was also the starting point for research into second language (L2) learning motivation (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 1985).

Dörnyei (2005) identified motivation as one of the most important ID variables as it "provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in SLA presuppose motivation to some extent" (p. 65). Motivation is one of the most challenging concepts of the social sciences, but most researchers can agree that motivation is responsible for the reason people choose a

course of action, the length of time they are willing to maintain the action, and the effort they are going to exert in their pursuit (Dörnyei, 2001).

In recent years second language (L2) learning motivation research has linked motivation types to learning outcomes—both linguistic and nonlinguistic—with a focus on proficiency as indicated by test scores (Gao et al., 2007). However, according to Wiriyachitra (2002) the Thai government includes nonlinguistic outcomes as well in their goals for ELL in Thailand. The ministry of education identifies three objectives for both core and elective English courses: knowledge, skill, and a positive attitude toward English, and each of the three objectives involves understanding the culture of native speakers, enjoying the use of English, and appreciating both the English language and its culture. This complements the belief L2 motivation researchers have always held that a foreign language is more than simply an academic subject. According to Dörnyei (2009) the researchers have generally linked the L2 to the "individual's personal 'core,' forming an important part of one's identity" (p. 9).

Because English proficiency in Thailand remains low after years of government educational reform, this research focuses on the students themselves--particularly those who have chosen to continue their ELL by choosing English as their university major. Determining what motivates these students to not only continue their ELL beyond their compulsory language learning during their grade school years but to choose it as a major while studying in an EFL environment may provide educators with the information they need to address the motivation of students during their grade school years. In addition, the nonlinguistic outcomes as set forth as objectives by the Thai government need to be investigated as well to determine if they are being met. Linking motivation types and self-identity changes among students will provide educators with a different perspective on their students and their learning processes and will help them make any pedagogical changes that need to be met in order to meet their objectives.

In order to better understand the unique situation of ELL in Thailand where English is not an officially recognized second language, the objectives of this research focused on two aspects of ELL—the motivation types held by students and the self-identity changes that occurred among the students. It identified the English learning motivation types held by northern Thai university students majoring in English and determined what, if any, self-identity changes have occurred with the students as a result of learning English. Finally, the research identified any correlations there may be between motivation types and the reported self-identity changes.

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were created to meet the research goals:

1) What motivation types do northern Thai university English majors have for learning English? To what extent are there differences among the students according to university year of study?

2) What self-identity changes, if any, do the students experience? To what extent do the self-identity changes vary according to university levels?

3) What is the correlation between the motivation types and reported self-identity changes or lack of change?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The current study is of significance to continuing research in motivation specifically in reference to the Thai context. Dörnyei (2001) wrote that studying English in post-colonial Hong Kong will have differing "motivational overtones" than studying EFL in Hungary (p. 66). Determining what motivates Thai students to continue their ELL past the compulsory foreign language subject of their grade school years may give insight to possible and favorable changes that can be implemented in the Thai ELL education system.

Gao et al. (2007) stated that most L2 learning motivation research to date has linked motivation types to linguistic outcomes such as proficiency test scores, but this research will add to the body that is expanding that field to include nonlinguistic outcomes as well. These nonlinguistic outcomes are still important in fulfilling the objectives of the Thai ministry of education. In order to know if the educational objective of having a positive attitude towards English, understanding and appreciating the culture of English speakers, and finding pleasure in and using English for their work is being met, the learners need an opportunity to report on the changes they feel have taken place to their self-identity throughout their ELL experience.

Finally, through identifying any correlations that may exist between motivation and self-identity changes, there may be an impact on teaching methods and the amount of time devoted to addressing students' L2 learning motivation types. Those L2 motivation types which bring about positive self-identity changes could be presented, modeled, and encouraged in the Thai EFL classroom throughout the compulsory grade school years.

1.4 Delimitation of the Study

The study focuses on English major students who are studying at a private northern Thai university. It took place during the first semester of study during the 2012 school year in the month of September, and it covers the students' reported motivation types and any self-identity changes they have experienced using questionnaires. The motivation portion came from a questionnaire developed by Noels and colleagues (2000) which is based upon the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985). The self-identity change portion came from Boonchum's (2009a) study in Thailand.

The study does not cover students who are studying outside of the northern region or at government universities and therefore, may not be a reflection of the population in another context. This study is also limited to English majors in order to control one of the variables that is considered to be an influential factor for both motivation and self-identity changes (Boonchum, 2009b; Gao et al., 2007).

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

1. Motivation in this study utilizes Gardner's (2001) definition identifying motivation as "the driving force in any situation" (p. 6). In the ELL situation this

results in the L2 learner making an effort to learn the language, displaying a consistent effort to learn the material by doing homework, doing extra work, and seeking out opportunities for further learning, and enjoying L2 learning.

2. Learning motivation types in this study are classifications of motivation types based on the reasons or goals that become the impetus for language learning. The two broad classifications used in this study are intrinsic and extrinsic motivation with each broad classification consisting of several subtypes.

3. Self-identity as used in this study is "how the learners perceive themselves in terms of linguistic and cultural groups they belong to, their values, communication styles, abilities and worthiness" (Gao et al., 2004, p. 1).

4. Self-identity change in this study is defined as a change that the learners perceive in themselves from the Thai cultural group to that of a Western or global cultural group.