Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

The English language continues to attract and demand the attention of learners worldwide. Graddol (2006) reported that "a massive increase in the number of people learning English has already begun, and is likely to reach a peak of around two billion in the next 10-15 years" (p. 14). One particularly salient example of the high demand for English language learning is currently taking shape within the nations of Southeast Asia. The bloc of 10 member-states which comprise ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has declared a common vision of an "ASEAN Economic Community" to be realized by the year 2015. Outlined in the *Roadmap for an ASEAN Community* (ASEAN, 2009), the vision of ASEAN includes the following strategic objective:

> Support the citizens of Member States to become proficient in the English language, so that the citizens of the ASEAN region are able to communicate directly with one another and participate in the broader international community. (p. 69)

Moreover, ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan, in a keynote address delivered in August 2011, declared that language proficiency must be developed urgently as a first step to cope with regional integration (Thai News Service Group, 2011). In short, the potential for more shared resources and a greater capacity of mobilization among people groups has magnified an urgency to learn English as the lingua franca within the region.

The increase in demand for English language learning also implies an increased demand for teachers of English. However, it has been noted for nearly two decades already that in many locations, the demand for English instruction far exceeds the supply of instructors (Schlusberg & Miller, 1995). Moreover, it has been predicted that the supply of professional practitioners in TESOL will likely never catch up with the demand for English instruction (Wilson, 2009).

The imbalance of supply and demand in English instruction has contributed to the use of individuals without professional TESOL credentials to fill the gap as providers of language instruction in the classroom. In some instances, these individuals are sought and hired by language teaching institutions to work as paraprofessionals. Such a role reflects a job position with professional expectations even without an initial presence of professional qualifications (Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2007).

Another sector filling the supply-demand gap is a corps of volunteers. In some settings, educational institutions actively seek volunteers to serve a

complementary classroom role by working as one-on-one tutors or teachers' aides (Wu & Carter, 2000). Volunteers have also been increasingly called upon to perform tasks typically done by paid staff: for example, choosing curriculum; creating lesson plans; teaching classes; and assessing and evaluating learners' needs and progress (Gilbertson, 2000; Wasik, 1998). In other settings, the volunteers themselves, or third-party agencies that recruit and use volunteers, initiate the offer to provide English instruction. The volunteer contingent of TESOL has been active both in areas labeled traditionally as ESL (English as a Second Language) as well as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings.

Yet, unlike the notion of *paraprofessional*, the title of *volunteer* rouses neither an explicit nor implicit professional expectation of performance. Rather, the tendency, particularly among professionals, is towards a view that holds *volunteer* and *professionally competent* as conceptually antonymous (Schindler-Rainman & Lippitt, 1971). The accuracy of this view is contingent upon the professional competency of each individual volunteer. However, Snow (1996) acknowledged that within TESOL, "most volunteer teachers do not have professional training or experience in language teaching, and are not necessarily interested in making a career of language teaching" (p. 2).

Numerous critical looks at volunteer resources in TESOL further indicate that the legitimacy of volunteer services in TESOL have been called into question. For one, Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell (2009) have conceded that despite good intentions, volunteers "are not prepared to deal with the complexity of providing instruction" to meet the specific needs of their learners (p. 131). Their conclusion is reinforced by the following statement issued by the global professional body of TESOL (2008): "The field of teaching English to speakers of other languages is a unique distinct academic and professional discipline with unique linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions that requires specialized education and training" (TESOL, 2008). Consequently, volunteers who have not received relevant education and training are linguistically, culturally, and pedagogically limited in what they can offer English language learners.

Another criticism is that an emphasis on finding volunteers (particularly, those without qualifications in TESOL) to satisfy the demand for English language learning disregards and devalues those professionally trained to take on the task. This is especially problematic in contexts where individuals not qualified for teaching English but considered as "native English speakers" are given preferable treatment over qualified local teachers (Govardhan, Nayar, & Sheorey, 1999; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Concerning this, Phillipson (1992) has denounced the notion that "the ideal teacher is a native speaker" (p. 185). In addition to noting the weaknesses of native speaker teachers, Medgyes (1992) highlighted ways in which qualified local nonnative English speaking teachers have an advantage, including: serving as a model of the successful learner of English; providing learners with more information about the language; empathizing with the learners' needs and problems; and sharing the learners' mother tongue. Liu (1999) expressed that "it really does not matter whether the teacher is [a 'native speaker'] or [a 'nonnative speaker'] of English, as having either as a teacher carries advantages as well as disadvantages. What matters is the teacher's professionalism" (p. 100). This makes Gilbertson's (2000) assertion even more poignant: that the use of volunteer human resources in TESOL has the potential to treat learners "as undeserving of professional education" (p. 152).

If volunteers – particularly, novice volunteers – are going to provide an adequate service to meet the demands of their students (and their critics), then the volunteer labor force must be adequately prepared for the task (Gilbertson, 2000). To date, however, the calls for adequate volunteer preparation are largely still being drowned out by the flood of advertisements for recruiting volunteers, such as these:

- Teach English Abroad - No Experience Required

- Whether you're intrigued by the techno heaven of Japan, the stunning beaches of Indonesia, the skyscrapers of South Korea, the bustling food markets of Vietnam, the islands of Thailand or the ancient history of China, your perfect TEFL opportunity is waiting for you.

- Thinking about volunteering abroad? Program placements include teaching English, turtle conservation, childcare work, eco-agriculture conversation, healthcare, and construction and renovation work. Program costs start from $295.

The first advertisement insinuates that English teaching is a task that requires little more than walking through the classroom door. The second prioritizes an exotic location over the responsibilities involved with English teaching. The third appears to place English teaching on a "have-it-your-way" value menu for the volunteer consumer. Such advertisements do little to inspire an outlook which values the needs of the English language learners, since, as stated by Liu (2008), the placement of individuals without professional training to teach English typically "has engendered unsatisfactory quality of English teaching" (p. 104).

Despite these and other criticisms, the volunteer contingent of TESOL remains largely unfazed by the debate for a number of reasons. First, as noted by Gilbertson (2000), "there are no requirements, beyond the desire to serve" for teaching positions within many volunteer-based organizations (p. 40). Second, in many locations around the world there is no law effectively impeding the teaching of English by volunteers (Henrichsen, 2010a). Third, the criticisms and concerns addressed in published TESOL literature largely have not reached the ears of the volunteer teaching community. This is due in part to a communication gap which exists between the body of professional TESOL practitioners and elements of the volunteer contingent within TESOL. Data about volunteers are rarely available outside the volunteer programs (Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009), and the volunteer community may not have accessed, or sought out, criticisms of its practice from professional circles. Fourth, for many volunteers, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages serves as a means to an end, rather than a goal in itself (Snow, 1996; Wong, 2009). For that reason, some volunteers may feel justified to continue utilizing English teaching in order to achieve their primary or more pressing goals, regardless of criticism from others.

In short, a major tension currently prevails within the field of TESOL. On one hand, there exists a high demand for English instruction to satisfy the urgent desire for increased English competence in many parts of the world. Seeking to meet this demand is a sizeable supply of qualified teachers, in particular, nonnative English speaking teachers, who may comprise 80 percent of the total English language teacher population (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Simultaneously, there are scores of individuals

also heeding the call to meet the demand for English language learning, often via short-term international volunteer experiences. With inadequate preparation, however, the actions of these volunteers are unlikely to bear their intended good fruit, and may instead turn sour for the English learners, for the volunteers, and for others. Is it possible to reconcile this discord? What does it take to make the short-term international volunteer English teaching experience a "win" for all involved?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The use of short-term international volunteers (STIVs) as providers of English language instruction has been an under-explored topic in the field of TESOL. Consequently, the present study endeavored to investigate the phenomenon. But first, a distinction must be made between two groups of STIVs within the field of TESOL. Noted in the previous section is the fact that volunteers may or may not have the specialized education and training recognized within the field of TESOL as requisite for the discipline of English teaching. In this study, those who do possess such qualifications are identified as "STIVETs" (short-term international volunteer English teachers). Those lacking such qualifications in TESOL are identified as "STIVELFs" (short-term international volunteer English language facilitators). Certainly, individuals of both groups may be called "teacher" by students in the English language classroom, and by others. However, making the distinction acknowledges that these two types of "teachers" are dissimilar in significant ways which warrant separate research studies.

Since the use of STIVELFs is both more prevalent and more problematic than that of STIVETs, an investigation of the needs of STIVELFs was selected as the focus of the study. Accordingly, one important objective of this research study was to provide an illuminative, contextualized account of the STIVELF phenomenon in narrative form: an exploration of the happenings of a one-week English program in a school in northern Thailand involving a group of short-term volunteers from the United States of America.

Further, the research study focused on generating answers to two central questions:

1. What are the needs of the short-term international volunteers relevant to facilitating English language learning in the local context?

2. What roles of responsibility do the various participants take on to address the needs of the short-term international volunteers?

The intended outcome of answering the first question was knowledge of what measures and provisions are significant towards addressing the needs of the volunteers. Answering the second question aimed for a deeper understanding of the delegation of responsibilities among various program participants in addressing the needs of the volunteers. This investigation of the volunteers' needs was meant as neither a slight to the learners' needs nor a tacit promotion of a volunteer-centered classroom. Instead, the investigation of volunteers' needs was simply one window to view the extent to which learners received quality attention to their English learning needs. As a final objective and based on insights from the research findings, this study sought to draft a developmental tool for stakeholders of English language programming that makes use of short-term international volunteers.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study has explored the needs of a group of individuals who traveled abroad for a short-term volunteer project in which they took on responsibilities for facilitating English language learning in a school setting. All 11 of the international volunteer participants hailed from the United States of America. Further, each of the international volunteers could be classified as a STIVELF, as none had formal training or education in TESOL.

The heart of this study took place in a village in northern Thailand. The language learners were children of the Hmong ethnic group. They were students in grades five through seven (ป.5 - ม.1) at the school in their village, and they had very limited prior communicative contact with English speakers. For these students, English may be considered their third language, after Hmong and Thai.

Readers should keep these nuances in mind as they relate the findings from this study to their own situations. The myriad of highly contextualized variables is too vast for replication in another study. Nevertheless, this study should prove to be an illumination of the unique challenges faced in TESOL with regard to the STIVELF contingent, and lessons learned from this study can be useful towards evaluating the needs in other short-term international volunteer contexts.

1.4 Definition of Terms

The focus of this study was the investigation of the "needs of short-term international volunteer English language facilitators." What follows should not be mistaken as the full range of meaning for each of the listed words. Rather, the definition of terms here reflects their application within the context of this study:

- *Needs*: For this study, needs were things (both tangible and intangible) diagnosed as either necessary or desirable in order for the volunteers to execute their volunteer roles. The diagnosis of volunteer needs was articulated by the volunteers, the researcher, or other participants.

- *Short-term*: In the present study, the total duration of the volunteers' stay in Thailand was 11 days, and the volunteer activities they conducted at the local school lasted five days (the afternoon class hours during one school week). For the purposes of this study, *short-term* also suggests what Slimbach (2000) referred to as a "transitory nature of the relationship" between the host culture participants and the volunteers (p. 7). That is, the volunteers had minimal prior contact with the local host institution and no anticipated obligations after their departure.

- *International*: The volunteer participants in this study traveled by plane from their country of origin and residence (the United States of America) to Chiang Rai Province in far northern Thailand.

- *Volunteer*: In this study, the label *volunteer* refers to the 11 international participants, all of whom consented to engage in labor activities without receiving financial compensation. There were three primary services rendered by this volunteer group during their stay in Thailand. On weekday mornings,

the volunteer group conducted a free health care advising station near the village church, operated by three volunteer participants with professional nursing qualifications. On weekday afternoons, the volunteer group engaged in English teaching at the village school. On their final weekend, the volunteer group members conducted a children's Bible program near the church.

- *English*: This study makes no claim for "whose" English was spoken or taught in the classroom, though it may be worth reiterating that all of the volunteers were from the United States of America.

- *Language facilitator:* The use of *language facilitator* here relates to the distinction made earlier between *teachers* and *language facilitators*. The use of *facilitator* in this sense denotes individuals who were assigned responsibility for carrying out classroom tasks typical of a language teacher, but doing so without specialized training and education in TESOL.

The following terms are also used in this study to refer to specific participants or groups of participants:

- *Lead teachers:* Of the 11 international volunteer participants, four were labeled as *lead teachers* in the classrooms at the school. Use of the word *teacher* here does not signify credentials in TESOL, as it has already been stated that none of the volunteer participants had a formal background in TESOL. However, the term *lead teacher* is used in order to distinguish these four individuals from the remaining seven volunteers who were not assigned a primary responsibility for teaching tasks at the village school.

- *Classroom assistants:* The seven international volunteer participants not classified as *lead teachers* were instead classified as *classroom assistants.* The *classroom assistants* also participated in English language activities at the village school, but to a lesser degree and typically in ways intended to support the work of the *lead teachers.*

- *Group leader:* One of the international volunteer participants was the *group leader*. She was the director of the non-profit organization through which the volunteer participants came.

- *Ministry coordinator:* The title of *ministry coordinator* refers to an American man who resided in Thailand, serving as a national coordinator for religious activities. While he was not classified as one of the international volunteer participants, the *ministry coordinator* served as the primary link of communication between program participants in Thailand and the international volunteer group prior to their arrival; he further accompanied the volunteer group throughout their stay in Thailand.

Finally, the following three acronyms have been introduced in this study as terms which refer to individuals who match each of the component parts within the respective acronyms.

- *STIV*: Short-term international volunteer

- *STIVET*: Short-term international volunteer English teacher

- *STIVELF*: Short-term international volunteer English language facilitator

1.5 Significance of the Study

Research about and resources for volunteers in language education are not uncommon (for examples, see Al Otaiba & Pappamihiel, 2005; Belzer, 2006; Gilbertson, 2000; Kutner, 1992; Reck et al., 1991; Schlusberg & Mueller, 1995; Wasik, 1998; Wu & Carter, 2000; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). However, in most cases available research is focused on volunteers who are serving in their community of residence. Moreover, prior research generally has not considered the duration of the volunteers' commitment. The present study offers a fresh perspective by investigating TESOL volunteers who travel internationally for a short-term commitment.

Numerous academic discussions have been published about the professional standards requisite for the advancement of TESOL as a professional body. This study contributes to the growing awareness and ensuing discussion of volunteer resource management within the TESOL community. As professional practitioners of TESOL trace their roots within the field, many return to memories of their first experiences working with language learners in largely volunteer conditions. This study takes into account that all professional TESOL practitioners have to start somewhere, and for a sizable population it is the volunteer experience that blossoms into a professional commitment to the field. The research builds on that understanding by looking critically at the short-term international volunteer situation, not merely to criticize it, but to pose an opportunity to promote responsible professionalization within the TESOL field.

1.6 Summary of the Chapter

Chapter One has provided an overview of the research study. The chapter has set forth an argument that the tension which exists due to the nature of short-term international volunteer activities in TESOL is relevant for deeper study. This has led to the presentation of objectives for this research study, including the following: providing an illuminative narrative account of the STIVELF experience; answering (within the scope of this study) two questions central to the needs of STIVELFs; and drawing on the findings to draft a developmental tool of benefit to stakeholders of English language programming which makes use of STIVs. This chapter has also presented the scope of the study and a set of definitions to guide readers as they apply this research study to their own unique contexts. Finally, the chapter has shown that the research study is significant to the field of TESOL, especially as it focuses on an under-researched sector of TESOL and strives to advance the responsible professionalization of the TESOL field together with its constituents.