

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

The pressure of mastering English has been very much felt recently in Thailand. Lanna Polytechnic Technological College, Chiangmai, for example, in addition to having their learners to obtain the vocational certificate for both technical area and the commercial area, has also put their attention to developing their learner's proficiency in occupational-English. Syllabus is designed to be in line with the national vocational certificate syllabus. This means designing English syllabus that is based on communication in the workplace and together with the technical terminology.

To illustrate this syllabus, I would like to take English for communication I (Course code 2000-1201) as one example. Based on the course description, the general goal of the English course is to be able to use English for communication in their working/ professional context. The learners should be able to communicate to the community within the context. The syllabus follows the content of the textbook. Therefore, the language forms and functions follow the textbook.

In this course, the learner's language proficiency is mostly at the beginning level. Even few of the learners have never had a chance to learn the language that put them into the lower beginning level. Therefore, the classroom can be considered as a mixed-level one. However, the lower beginning level learners have often been neglected in the learning process in the classroom.

For this course, a textbook has been chosen to be used for the rest of the course. The textbook chosen is "Connect 1" (Richard, J. C., Barbisan, C. and Sandy, C., 2010). The reasons for choosing the textbook would be mainly from its coming together with a workbook, the instant teaching materials, CD audio, guidance activities and tests. The complete set of teaching materials would be a time saver for the teachers that help to decrease their work load. Moreover, the institution has agreed to use this book as the required textbook for this course. However, in the process of teaching, teachers often adapted this textbook according to the students' needs. The content of the book is designed to follow the communicative approach. Although the textbook suggests communicative approach to the teaching in the classroom, teachers tend to focus more on grammar teaching to accommodate the grammar-oriented tests that the students will have.

From my teaching experience in this context, the learners are more interested in studying courses for their field than English courses. English is a required core course that they have to take. This may explain their lack of interest in English. Therefore, they pay less attention to the English lesson. From my observation, they usually talk or chit chat with friends, and do not want to do much in the classroom. Looking at the student's behavior and attitudes, I felt inspired to do an investigation

on what kind of tasks (especially creative tasks) that can stimulate learners to learn English.

Reviewing several classroom research methods, I found action research can help me find the way of solving the teaching problems that I mentioned earlier. In exploring various ways of teaching the language skills more systematically and in details, action research would be one approach that perhaps encourages the success in language teaching and learning. At the same time, action research could help the teacher to reflect on and improve her practice as a medium for professional development. Therefore, action research is used as the methodology of this study.

1.2 Research questions

From my classroom observation, I come to an initial understanding that if the classroom tasks are interesting and encouraging with supporting approaches, learners may want to get involved in the learning in the classroom. Therefore, in this study I would like to explore this further and come up with a preliminary research questions as follows:

1. What are the ways to use creative tasks to teach the beginner level students to learn listening and speaking skills for communication?
2. What are the ways to use creative tasks to motivate learners to learn?
3. How do these creative tasks enhance learners' listening and speaking skills for communication and their learning motivation?

1.3 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To develop various creative tasks that can be used to enhance learners' listening and speaking skills for communication;
2. To develop various creative tasks that can be used to enhance learners' motivation in learning;
3. To examine the effects of creative tasks on motivation in learning and on listening and speaking skills for communication.

1.4 Significance of the study

By doing an exploration in the use of games in this study, I believe that the information is very useful for teachers in terms of;

- 1) providing information for teachers on how certain action (the use of games) in classroom instruction affect students' learning in classroom;
- 2) raising teachers' awareness on the importance of reflecting, monitoring and reforming their practice in the language classroom.

1.5 Scope of the study

Since this study is a classroom action research, the scope of this study focuses only on one specific classroom. The action research was conducted in the English for communication I course. The target group of this study is 30 Electronics Technology students session 2 who study in this course for the 2014 academic year. The course

mainly focuses on general English knowledge for communication in the daily life. The general objective of this course is to develop learners' English four skills for communication purposes within community in context. The course also encourages learners to be able to use the self-learning centre in the institution as an additional alternative method to develop their language proficiency.

The learners who enroll to this course are usually learners with lower or beginning level English language proficiency. The classroom is usually a mixed level one but most of the students can be categorized as beginning level students. As explained in my reflection section above, most of the students are more interested to study courses related to their specific field than in learning English.

Therefore, this study particularly focused on the use of creative tasks (that may be in a form of a group work, group discussion and brainstorming activities with problem solving activities, classroom activities, individual assignment, cooperative learning, games, and etc.) in the teaching of listening and speaking micro-skills for communication skills. This study particularly explored the creative tasks in a form of language games ('find someone who' and 'race game'), choral reading ('jazz chants', and poems choral reading), and creative writing (re-creating a poem).

These creative tasks were used to gain learners' interests in learning and developing learners' listening and speaking micro-skills for communication. The speaking and listening micro-skills for communication in this study specifically focused on: 1) enabling the learners to pronounce and produce the comprehensible sound especially the last sound; 2) enabling the learners to recognize the different words and their literal meaning; 3) enabling the learners' to enunciate the words (especially not to drop the last) and; 4) enabling the learners ask for information and give someone's information. These first two micro-skills were examined in the first cycle and the second two micro-skills were developed for the second cycle. By doing this study, however, I do not intend to criticize the curriculum or syllabus designers of the program, instead I intend to explore other possible type of tasks that can be used as alternative tasks in the classroom.

1.6 Definition of terms

Creative tasks are a task assigns in language classroom that provides choices or experiences for learners to explore. This task engages learners in language achievement based creativity. In this study, creative tasks refer to the following three types of creative tasks: language games ('Find someone who' and 'Race Game'), choral readings ('Dialogue poem' and 'Jazz chants'), and re-constructing a dialogue poem ('Best excuses').

Motivation refers to three affective aspects in learning (following Dornyei's categorization): conative (what one wants), cognitive (what one thinks), and affective (what one feels) functions. The study adopted Dornyei's (2001) motivational teaching practice as the process-oriented organization which includes: 1) creating the basic motivational conditions; 2) generating initial motivation; 3) maintaining and protecting motivation and; 4) encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. Dornyei's process-oriented organization is adopted in designing and implementing the two cycles of action.

Listening and speaking skills for communication refers to the listening and speaking micro-skills that are needed for communication purposes (e.g. giving some information, facts and opinions, responding, making some discussions, making the telephone conversation, interviewing, etc.). This study particularly focused on the following micro-skills: pronouncing and producing comprehensible sounds, recognizing vocabulary meaning, and recognizing how to ask and give one's information.

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