CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As an ever-changing worldwide economy emerges and demand increases for more effective communication with others, personal ability to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries is tested. The success or failure of international events, whether related to business, diplomacy, or casual discourse, will depend on culturally-sensitive, persuasive and clear communication. People learn English because it is used internationally. It is a language of technology, education, commerce and science (Pope, 2002, p. 19; Brown, 2001, p. 118). Four hundred million people use English as their L1, while seven hundred million use it as a second or foreign language (http://www.britishcouncil.com). Non-native speakers, who belong to regions where English is spoken as an L2, learn because it is part of an educational curriculum and in many cases they must use the language in formal settings. Countries around the world have responded to the increased demand for English by adopting various policies intended to promote the development of English communication. One of these responses has been a general trend in teaching English to younger and younger groups of learners.

1.1 Rationale and Statement of Problem

There are a variety of arguments which make the case that children should be exposed to English at younger ages. Some arguments, such as the Critical Period Hypothesis made popular by Eric Lenneberg (1967, p. 180) in his work *The Biological Foundations of Language*, which states that children are biologically more adept at picking up languages and that therefore we should take advantage of this potential. Others would simply argue that in order to remain competitive to international standards, teaching English to younger children is a necessity. This study does not seek outright to dispute the veracity of the matter; the simple fact is that, whether for better or worse, "the ages at which children start learning English has been lowering across the world" (Graddol, 2006). There is unfortunately too often the trend, as the ages of learners' drop, of bringing along tried and tested curricula for older groups of learners while making only superficial adaptations. To make the best of the situation, and hopefully to present our children with as many opportunities and resources as we can put at their disposal, teaching methods must therefore adapt also, to specifically target and accommodate the many learning styles of our young learners.

There is a popular belief that children as L2 learners are superior to adults (Scovell, 2000). Simply put, the younger the learner, the quicker the learning process begins and better outcomes occur. Adding other variables reveals a more complex picture revealing both favorable and unfavorable age related differences being associated with early and late starting L2 learners (Johnson, 2002).

Furthermore, although the factor of age is an uncontroversial research variable extending from birth to death, (Cook, 1995), and the critical period hypothesis is a narrowly focused proposal subject to repeated debate, it is the latter that tend to rule SLA discussions (Garcia Lecumberri and Geraldo, 2003), resulting in numerous conceptualizations. In further research by (Bailystok, 1997; Richards and Schmidt 2002; Abello-Contesse et al 2006) references have been made:

- There exists multiple critical periods based on specific language components- age six for L2 phonology.
- The non-existence of one or more critical periods for L2 versus L1 acquisition
- There may be a 'sensitive' yet not 'critical period.'
- A continual, gradual cognitive decline from childhood to adulthood

In the Kingdom of Thailand, English became compulsory for all primary children from Grade 1 in 1996 (Methitham and Chamcharatsri, 2011) and yet Thailand continues to struggle at achieving English competency. Thailand ranked "54th out of 56 countries globally for English proficiency" in a recent IMD World Competitiveness Report and continues to score beneath the international average on TESOL exams (Reuters and the Korea Herald, as reported by Thai Woman Talks, 2012). Thai children frequently claim English is their least favorite subject. As a result, Thai students lack proficiency in English for communication. Spoken English language ability is an extremely important factor according to ASEAN standards and will affect current Thai students in the immediate future. However, proficiency in the target language offers increased opportunities for educational advancement as well as monetary gain. Even immigrants in Thailand learn quickly that a command of the English language increases job opportunities and becomes a status symbol (Citravelu et al. 2002, p. 24). Thailand has always been a country with one official language and the people of this nation pride themselves in the fact that they are the only country in the region of Indo-China that never to have been colonized. Speaking one recognized national language leaves Thais with a general sense of national unity and stability (Wiriyachitra, 2002).

One way Thai English language proficiency is measured is by using the English Proficiency Index (EPI). It is a product of (EF) Education First, a global language training company that draws conclusive data collected by the administration of online tests.
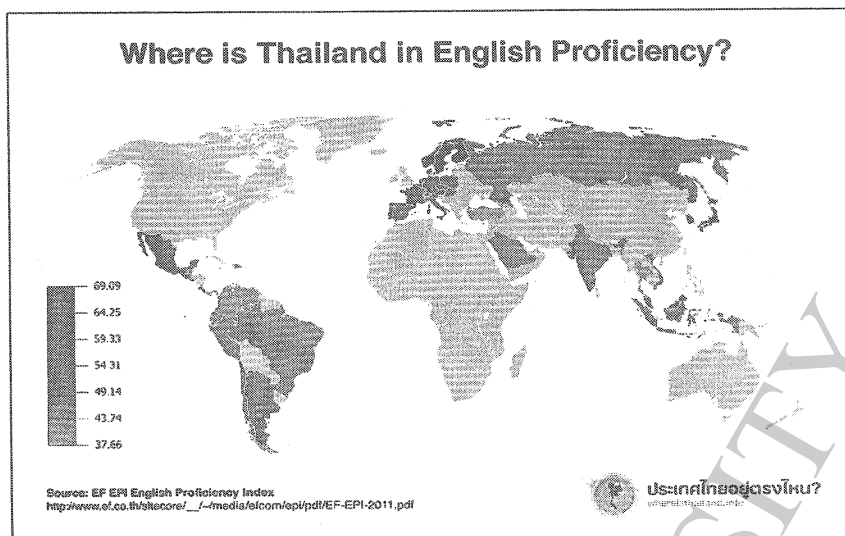
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Figure 1 Thailand ranking in global English proficiency

Research indicates that in the area of proficiency, Thailand falls in the lower half of the spectrum. There are many issues that contribute to the lower rating. Different elements that are both positive and negative will be discussed during the research.

Realizing the need for better structure of the existing curriculum, it became necessary to develop new curricula for young learners with the intention of combining current psychological theory and an up-to-date understanding of how children learn with an Active Learning Strategy (ALS) approach and the proper amount of stimulus and motivation, we would create an experience for our young learners that would not only get them talking but also positively shape their attitudes toward language learning for the future.

Four key researchers are mentioned throughout this paper. They have been chosen for their input on teaching very young learners the psychological roots of constructivism which began with the developmental work of Jean Piaget (1896–1980), who developed a theory (the theory of genetic epistemology) that analogized the development of the mind to evolutionary biological development and highlighted the adaptive function of cognition. Piaget proposed four stages in human development (1) the sensorimotor stage, (2) the preoperational stage, (3) the concrete operational stage, and (4) the formal operational stage. For Piaget, the development of human intellect proceeds through adaptation and organization. Adaptation is a process of assimilation and accommodation, where external events are assimilated into existing understanding, but unfamiliar events, which don't fit with existing knowledge, are accommodated into the mind, thereby changing its organization.

Countless studies have demonstrated–or tried to discredit–Piaget's developmental stages. For example, it has become clear that most adults use formal operations in only a few domains where they have expertise. Nonetheless, Piaget's hypothesis that learning is a transformative rather than a cumulative process is still central. Children do not learn a bit at a time about some issue until it finally comes together as understanding. Instead, they make sense of whatever they know from the very beginning. This understanding is progressively reformed as new knowledge is acquired, especially new knowledge that is incompatible with their previous understanding.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's (1896–1934) relevance to constructivism derives from his theories about language, thought, and their mediation by society. Vygotsky held the position that the child gradually internalizes external and social activities, including communication, with more competent others. Although social speech is internalized in adulthood (it becomes thinking), Vygotsky contended that it still preserves its intrinsic collaborative character.

In his experiments, Vygotsky studied the difference between the child's reasoning when working independently versus reasoning when working with a more competent person. He devised the notion of the *zone of proximal development* to reflect on the potential of this difference. Vygotsky's findings suggested that learning environments should involve guided interactions that permit children to reflect on inconsistency and to change their conceptions through communication.

Vygotsky and Piaget's theories are often contrasted to each other in terms of individual cognitive constructivism (Piaget) and social constructivism (Vygotsky). Some researchers have tried to develop a synthesis of these approaches, though some, such as Michael Cole and James Wertsch, argue that the individual versus social orientation debate is over-emphasized. To them, the real difference rests on the contrast between the roles of cultural artifacts. For Vygotsky, such artifacts play a central role, but they do not appear in Piaget's theories.

In Howard Gardner's classrooms where the focus is on learning for deep understanding, students might study endangered species, island biogeography, or the principles of gravity over several months. As students pursue questions, they derive new and more complex questions to be investigated. Building useful knowledge structures requires effortful and purposeful activity over an extended period.

For this research paper, the researcher defines active learning as a process whereby students engage in activities, such as reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content.

Jerome Bruner sees learning as an active process where learners' construct new ideas and concepts based on their past and current knowledge. Learner chooses and transforms information, constructs a hypothesis and makes decisions based on the

cognitive structure. Cognitive structure such as schema and mental models provide meaningful experiences and allows the learner to go beyond the information presented.

Teaches should encourage students to discover learning strategies on their own. The task of the instructor is to engage young learners in active dialogue. The curriculum should be designed is such a way as to spiral of scaffold so the student is constantly building a knowledge based on previous learning experience.

Bruner (1966) conveys that active learning should include four major aspects:

1. Predisposition for learning
2. Ways a body of knowledge is structured to be easily understood by young learners.
3. The most effective sequences to present material
4. The nature of pacing of 'carrot and stick'

More recent research from Bruner has expanded the theoretical framework to include social and cultural aspects of the learning process.

The success of any educational change, specifically as massive as a curriculum change, depends on how teachers perceive it and what they do to implement it, simply because "it is the teachers who reflect on change, absorbing and manipulating new ideas and developments" (Ekiz, 2004, p. 341). Therefore, any attempts to assess the new syllabus changes should certainly include teachers who experience these changes in their current conditions and contexts as end-users. For this reason, the study described here investigates the opinions of practicing English language teachers regarding the general characteristics, aims/outcomes and the content of the new Native Speaker Preschool Curriculum K1-K3 Program, which was introduced in 2012. Given the deficiency of research on the new Active Learning Strategies Teaching Programs, the study aims to contribute information about how teachers, administrators, parents and students perceive the changes in the new program.

The research tries to define the theories that directly support an Active Strategies curriculum. Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist and developmental theorist, recognized the importance of play and its role in the development of logical thinking (Piaget, 1972). Piaget suggests that play serves many purposes and provides an excellent vehicle for learning. By handling many different materials, children learn to observe, compare, sort, and sequence .Their awareness expands as they experiment, make discoveries, and make changes to their current thinking to incorporate new insights. Recent study supports Piaget's theories that play is linked to learning. When 4-year-olds were provided opportunities to engage in high amounts of child-initiated, free-choice activities supported by a variety of equipment and materials to explore, the study showed that at age 7 those children outperformed their peers who did not have such opportunities on cognitive and language tasks (Montie, Xiang and Schweinhart, 2006).

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More up to date research supports Vygotsky's theories. Complex socio-dramatic play is linked to the development of self-regulatory competence and may be particularly beneficial for children who are impulsive or less advanced in self-regulatory development (Elias and Berk, 2002). Private speech, or self-talk, is an important part of developing self-regulation skills. Krafft and Berk found that the private speech of 3- to 5-year-olds was more likely to occur during open-ended activities, especially dramatic play, than in closed-ended tasks with predetermined goals (Krafft and Berk, 1998).

Certain experiences stimulate mental activities that lead to meaningful learning, this is active learning. Mentally active learning of ideas-and-skills can occur in a wide variety of thought-stimulating activities, ranging from direct learning (of ideas that are explained in a web-page, book, lecture, video, TV or radio show,...) to learning by discovery (as in doing an experiment and then trying to discover your own explanations for what has been observed), or in design projects and other kinds of problem solving where the learning cannot be defined as either direct or discovery. All of these thought-stimulating activities can produce active learning, because educationally productive mental activity can occur — with or without physical activity in which you "do" something — during a wide variety of mentally-active experiences.

1.1.1 The National Educational Reform Act of 1999

The National Educational Reform Act was enacted in 1996 and continues to the present. The principal objectives of the Reform Act are to ensure that education aims at the full development of the people in all aspects - physical and mental health, intellect; knowledge; morality; integrity; and the quest of a desirable lifestyle in accordance with society and in harmony with other people. According to the Act, the provision of education shall be based upon the principles of a lifelong education for all; the participation of all segments of society in educational provision; and continuous development of the bodies of knowledge and learning processes (Published on Monday, 8th November 1999: *The Nation*). The act comprises four main areas of concern; (1) the school, (2) curriculum, (3) teacher reform and (4) administrative reform. Its main concern is that learners have the ability to study and develop. The document maintains that learners are the key component and the theory of lifelong leaning should be an essential component of life. Hence, a twelve-year basic education will be provided free to all Thai students. In 2005, an Office of Quality Assurance was instated. Members are tasked to oversee quality control of education in every level and in every aspect. In theory, schools are to be given more autonomy. There will be greater involvement by stakeholders such as family, and local communities in school policy and administration. An independent and learner-centered approach is necessary and analytical learning instead of rote learning will be incorporated. Teacher education is also a center of attention. Teachers will participate in research and development, and their teaching abilities will be assessed, National Educational Reform Act (1996).

However, certain obstacles have caused difficulties in English language teaching and learning in both primary and secondary schools. Biyaem (1997) states that Thai teachers face the following difficulties due to heavy teaching loads, too many students in the classroom (40-60 in many cases), and insufficient language skills. Methitham and Chamcharatsri claim that Thai teachers "may have played a passive role, never having been empowered to take charge of their teaching" and while change and policy came from those with power" (Methitham and Chamcharatsri, 2011).

It is not only the level of English competency that inhibits Thais from being able to keep pace with rapid development and global political changes taking place. Research conducted to teachers' performance in Thailand is influenced significantly by administrative and management systems. Teachers are required to follow rigid curriculums and are evaluated on aspects that are secondary to good teaching practice. This current system involves an archaic, top-down authority model, which can foster distrust and suspicion between teachers and management, (Brigham Young University and EMSTAR, Inc., 1999).

Many school inspectors are out of touch with recent developments in teaching methodology. In many regions, they employ very outdated criteria for evaluating school practices and teacher ability. This type of management model prevents teachers from experimenting with new strategies. In Thailand, both Rajabahts and Faculties of Education are seen as key providers of teacher development needs. However, in recent years due to a lack of cross-institutional dialogue and a concrete investment education, those responsible for teacher training and development have not made enough effort to provide the necessary leadership in understanding in implementing educational reform and teacher professional development. (Source: ETS http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/TOEFL-SUM-2010.pdf.)

There is reluctance for Thai teachers to routinely participate in international learning communities in order to be exposed and involved with new, innovative research in curriculum design and implementation (Kanoknirundorn, 1997). The ultimate aim of a modern, global education system is to assist learners to operate effectively in a future world of change, complexity and competition. There should be nothing left to chance. Goals are set and plans are made and implemented systematically. In this research, the implementation and development of an effective curriculum, teaching programs and suggestions for professional development play an indispensible role since they are porthole which expectations from stakeholders in terms of knowledge, ideas, values and skills are made real (Ultinar, 2003).

This current scenario, although not without hope, cannot be accomplished with money alone. It requires the dedication and collaboration of educators as well as private sector and organizations to encourage the integration of Native English speakers such as the British Council, and schools who actively integrate Native English programs into their schools starting with young and very young learners. It is the continued hope of the Thai Ministry of Education that Thais can effectively use

English in business, science and technology. Most important, is that the citizens of Thailand can promote the country, its customs and its rich cultures to the rest of the world. Learning and speaking English from an early age will further this endeavor.

The new curriculum is designed with regard to creating real and authentic objectives and differing pedagogical approaches. Some areas remain a challenge. Some of these challenges can be are discussed in research from (Carr and Penn, 2000). The first concern is that resources are available for early childhood education. The successful delivery of any curriculum depends on its structural features. These include funding, regulations, accountability and adequate training. If the staff is poorly trained, the curriculum will not be delivered properly, especially when this curriculum style requires both physical and mental stamina. This research shows that the preschool sector for education in Thailand is poorly funded which prevents the training of staff and the recruitment of motivated and highly trained professionals. The training issue is an ongoing difficulty for teachers teaching in Thailand.

The second challenge is assessment. Because of the emphasis on holistic goals rather than strict knowledge based on content, it is difficult to assess very young learners. New frameworks for evaluation appropriate to defined objectives must be worked out. In the future, matters concerning the amount of time used to assess children must be explored. Carr and May (2000) report that:

"Given a curriculum model that sees learning as the development of more complex and useful understanding, knowledge and skill attached to purposeful and cultural contexts, rather than a staircase of individually acquired skills , the assessment and evaluation of children and programs becomes a complex matter."

So how does the NP Program monitor progress? This researcher suggests using research-developed assessment tools that satisfy multiple purposes.

The NP Program is designed to:

- Look for meaningful educational outcomes
- Gather information in ways that put young learners at ease
- Provide accurate data that can be used for future curriculum development policy

1.2 Research question

Will a new Active Learning Strategies curriculum be effective in enhancing and promoting K2 young learners English communication ability?

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1.3 Objectives of the study

1. To develop and evaluate an Active Learning Strategies curriculum designed for a group of K2 Students.
2. To investigate if an increase occurs in ESL communication ability after the implementation of a new Active Learning Strategies curriculum.

1.4 Significance of the study

The results of this study will offer insightful and beneficial information for teachers who are interested in teaching English to Very Young Learners. Themes and activities mentioned in the study might increase the amount of learning taking place in the L2 classroom. Introducing Thai culturally sensitive and authentic materials into the classrooms of young learners offers a glimpse into how English is spoken both in

Thailand and internationally, which is quite different from how it is written. It will also change how English is taught globally, making the learning of language both challenging and fun at the same time. Our goal is to make the language classroom a happy, fun and safe environment which sets the foundation for further language studies. The researcher would like to influence future research developments including:

1. Setting research guidelines for future academic study.
2. Set new goals and expectations for K2 students while allowing them to discover what expectations need to be developed.
3. Apply these theories into planning and development of future projects developed by the Thai Ministry of Education.

1.5 Scope of the study

1.5.1 Sample

The sample group is confined specifically to the above mentioned 24 students who were between the ages of four and five years during the time of the study. These 24 students were enrolled in the Native Speaker Program for K2. Teachers involved with each class consisted of a Native Speaker English instructor, a Thai co-teacher with some knowledge of English and both classes had student teachers from a local university who accompanied the class to the designated Native Speaker classroom each day for two thirty minute classes. Both classes received the same treatment.

1.5.2 Content

The current Active Learning Strategies curriculum is based on the research of four key childhood learning academics. This research intends to suggest that Vygotsky's dream of maximizing the Zone of Proximal Development can be attained by utilizing Gardner's approach of nurturing the students' combination of intelligences. This idea of teaching and learning will allow educators to teach ahead of development, to teach for understanding, to motivate and promote the students' creativity and imagination, and to encourage their personal, social and academic growth. Bruner looks at constructivist theory that sees learning as a building requiring scaffolding. This is knowledge building on previous knowledge.

From this perspective, "instruction is good only when it proceeds ahead of development, when it awakens and rouses to life those functions which are in the process of maturing or in the zone of proximal development. It is in this way that instruction plays an extremely important role in development."(Vygotsky, 1978).

1.5.3 English communication skills and abilities

After months of researching scholarly works, the curriculum design committee recognized two major publications that provided a framework for the new curriculum. The titles of these works are 1) *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool*, (Dodge et al, 2005) and *ESL Standards for Pre- K- 12 Students*,(1997) by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Inc., Sixth Printing.

The current focus of English communication skills for Kindergarten NP2:

Reading

- Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page.
- Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters.
- Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.
- Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.

Writing

- Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book (e.g., *My favorite book is* . .
- Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic.
- Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.

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Speaking

- Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about kindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.
- Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).
- Continue a conversation through multiple exchanges.
- Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood.
- Ask and answer questions in order to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood.

Listening

- Instructor will describe, model and drill familiar people, places, things, and events and, with prompting and support, provide additional detail.
- Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions as desired to provide additional detail.
- Listen to instructor's commands and respond correctly through speech and gesture.

Integrated skill sets (combining 4 skills abilities)

- Exhibit comprehensive understanding and familiarity of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes) through various means.
- Recognize and produce rhyming words.
- Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.
- Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words.
- Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel consonant, or CVC) words.
- Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words.
- Demonstrate basic knowledge of one-to-one letter-sound correspondences by producing the primary or many of the most frequent sound for each consonant.
- Associate the long and short sounds with common spellings (graphemes) for the five major vowels.
- Recognize first letter of and sound of common high-frequency words by sight (e.g., *the, of, to, you, she, my, is, are, do, does*).
- Distinguish between similarly spelled words by identifying the sounds of the letters that differ.

1.5.4 Research Variables

The purpose of this paper is to identify certain variations among experimental programs and to discuss the manner in which such variations seem to affect a program's success. To accomplish this purpose, an in-depth analysis of assorted, significant preschool curriculum studies was completed and outcomes reflected pertinent variables that occur when constructing a curriculum model reflecting Active Learning Strategies that develop English Communication Ability of K2 students.

1.6 Definition of terms

K2 young learner

Preschool Students (ages 2 to 5) Preschool children are in a sensitive period for language development. The research focuses on 24 K2 students at a private institution in the Northern Region of Thailand.

Active Learning Strategies curriculum

This curriculum is based on Active Learning. Active learning is an umbrella term that refers to three models of instruction that focus the responsibility of a learning   Strategies curriculum is a curriculum constructed based on the concept of Vygotsky that focuses on the natural learning styles of children. Scaffolding, social interaction, zone of proximal development combined with Multiple Intelligence theory presented by Gardner. Bruner describes how learning spirals or scaffolds into further learning. Finally, Piaget contributes to the research through his philosophy of a child's four stages of development. This research focuses on his second stage labeled the sensory motor stage

English communication ability

Communication ability is a certain technique of communicating by using skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Body language such as gestures combined with effort put forth and participation can persuade the student and bring about the change that

the teacher wants the pupil to exhibit. Secondly, we have interpersonal communication skills. This type of communication involves maximum interaction through words and gestures. We also have non-verbal communication skills. This includes aspects such as body language, facial expressions, eye contact, etc., which also become a part of the communicating process.

This research includes:

- Speaking
- Listening
- Reading
- Writing
- Integrated skills

Effectiveness

The specific elements of an Active Learning Strategies curriculum that improves K2 students English communication ability.