

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The educational system of Thailand is said to be largely teacher-centered. Having been a “product” of this system, the researcher has realized that it is time for a change to occur: student-centered education should become a reality. With such greatly desired change in mind, the researcher attempted to investigate a possible way of teaching that would support the reformation of Thai education. The literature on education, in general, and language learning, in particular, points to several factors that contribute to effective learning; and the nature or quality of student-teacher relationship is one of the most crucial factors. Hence, if Thailand would like to see positive changes in its educational system, it should take a close look at the student-teacher relationship. This present research has been undertaken from this perspective.

Rationale and Statement of the Problem

Teaching and learning, in general, focuses on teaching methodologies and strategies. In light of this, it is the teacher’s duty to work hard and invest a lot of energy to find good methods to make both the teaching and learning successful. However, an important variable exists beyond the methodologies and strategies. Though generally neglected in the past, the variable that has greatly affected the teacher and learner is the presence of a positive human relationship or rapport between them. “The effective relationship between teacher and learner is a very important factor, more important than teaching methodologies or topics being taught” (Gordon, 1974 p. 15).

The researcher has observed from both teaching and learning in a second language classroom, that the teacher is preoccupied with good teaching and learning strategies. This focus on strategy has been a problem for learners of a new language, especially in a developing country, Thailand, where English is a foreign language. It is not easy to spark the learners' interests and keep their attention in the class if the method is not suitable. Therefore, the focus of the classroom time in such a situation is to fulfill the school curriculum, and the focus of the learners is merely to study in order to pass the test, and complete the school requirement. In circumstances like this, the teacher's success is measured by how well the students have completed the examinations and how much the teacher can control the class and keep students quiet.

Furthermore, the teacher's duty is limited to the class time. On the other hand, the students sometimes find the class boring and wish it would finish as soon as possible. Many times teachers like to show power over the students in order to control them. This attitude sows fear and frustration in the learners. Having observed the mentioned conditions, the researcher has realized a more crucial factor than teaching strategies that would greatly benefit both the teacher and learners, that is, for the teacher to use positive human relationships in the teaching and learning context.

Background of Education in Thailand

In 1998, Thailand had 800,000 people working in the field of education in addition to 600,000 teachers (Chiangkul 2000). As a result, two main problems exist: the number of teachers is too great, yet the quality of teaching is too low. This low quality has led to both simple and serious problems which range from inappropriate manners, to lack of moral integrity, all the way to child abuse. Moreover, general problems exist as well, including

students having to repeat grades or to drop out, even before completing the compulsory sixth grade level. Furthermore, despite the huge number of teachers, the student-teacher ratio has increased the teaching load to overwhelming proportions. The same statistics (Chiangkul 2000) show that among junior high school students, 92.62% finished while 7.38% dropped out. Among senior high school students, 83.63% graduated while 17.33% quit before graduation. At the vocational school, 79.82% completed their studies, but a large number (21.18%) did not finish at all. The teacher-student ratio for elementary schools was 1:18, and 1:22 for both junior and senior high schools.

As the statistics show, even though 14,000 people were salaried to provide Thailand with well educated citizens, a large number of students did not complete basic education, a fact which has greatly affected Thailand's economic and social development. Undoubtedly, this apparent misuse of the nation's budget for education has also resulted in negative effects on the students themselves, foremost of which, is the lost opportunity for advanced education and self-improvement. These effects have also created a negative attitude toward education among the students and their parents.

Lack of government funds is not the only cause of early exodus from the educational system. Students may tend to think that they are not intelligent enough to complete school and consequently, lose their self-confidence, and ultimately, drop out of school. Furthermore, a closer analysis of the situation might reveal that their failure was more likely due to the school environment, the learners' family situation, or the school's inflexibility. It might even have been because the school could not provide appropriate programs to fit the learners' abilities. Whatever the cause, the learners cannot adjust themselves to fit into the inflexible, if not rigid academic setting of the school, and ultimately large numbers leave the school for good.

As mentioned, the low effectiveness of teachers remains a problem. From an August 1993 survey of people involved in the field of education, including teachers, administrators, and other school employees, 57% rated grades 1-9 teachers “low” on effectiveness. The respondents felt that many teachers (20%) do not want to be teachers, but they could not get better paying jobs. Some college graduates, who have not had any teacher training ended up teaching in order to make a reasonable living or to fill in time until a better job becomes available (Chiangkul 2000).

Chiangkul (2000) cites another serious problem and this concerns parents. According to the same report, 66.59% of the parents pay bribes to get their children into particular schools. This, in turn, results in a poor image for school administrators in general.

Sinlarat (1999, pp. 49-51) cited other reasons for the need to reform education in Thailand, namely:

1. Classroom content is far removed from “real-life” which results in many problems both for the individual and for society. Learners are made to study something that is so far removed from every day life that it becomes almost impossible to understand.
2. The educational system has a negative effect on the learners’ intellectual development because the emphasis is on “reciting”.
3. There is low learning effectiveness compared with the leading countries in the same region.
4. A teacher-centered system is mainly used. The teacher tells learners what he/she has read. In turn, the learners’ duty is to memorize what he or she has been told.
5. Learning is evaluated only in terms of the information that was dictated by the teacher.

Moreover, the social hierarchy is still strongly embedded in all aspects of Thai life. Teachers and students are assumed to exist on different levels. Teachers are expected to know everything and be able to answer every question asked by the students, which is why they are so highly respected by most students. As a result, while the teacher is teaching, students are expected to be obedient and quiet. It is considered aggressive, and perhaps even unacceptable, to challenge or argue with the teacher. Indeed, even asking a question in class is thought to undermine the authority of the teacher in that it implies that the lesson was not well taught. Because the teacher is expected to know all things, the students are expected to believe everything the teacher tells them. As a result, the classroom instruction affects students' attitudes greatly. Tadanat (1985) says that the teacher is the most important person in the teaching-learning process. He/she highly influences the learners' learning and the learners' attitudes, even to the extent, at least to some degree, of mind-control.

Generally speaking in the Thai context, the teacher-student relationship is seen as that of a director with a subordinate. Teachers are afraid that they will lose control if they become too close or become friends with their students. Teachers are normally satisfied if they can control the classroom by keeping the students absolutely quiet even if it means frightening them. This fear produces anxiety, which in turn has a profoundly negative effect on learning. The Thai situation is indeed ultra teacher-centered, a condition that is regrettably culture-based.

Any new perspective or major change in Thai education, i.e. a student-centered system, will be very difficult to implement. Partly for this reason, this study has set out to investigate a different type of educational situation for Thailand in which teachers can develop more positive human relationships with their students.

The Research Setting

The Christian Outreach Center (COC) where this study was done has offered Bible and Christian Education courses for local students for three years. The COC is a branch of the COC church in Australia. There are three different study programs offered, varying in length from five months to two or three years, during which all students are required to study English twice a week, 90 minutes per period. Since the church is worldwide, the COC of Thailand regularly has a number of foreign visitors. Although the Thai theological students have many opportunities to meet foreigners, their low English proficiency is a barrier to effective communication. They simply cannot speak English well enough to establish real contact with foreigners.

Since the COC Bible course materials were originally prepared in English, they are taught in English with a Thai translator. Consequently, it was advantageous for the students to have some basic English skills.

Previously, the COC hired native speakers of English to teach English because they felt that this would help the students to learn to communicate in natural English. However, since the teachers could neither speak Thai nor the local language (Kammuang), the classes had to be conducted exclusively in English. In addition, because the students understood so little English, they were nervous to speak and did not participate in the class very much. On the other hand, the teacher, who was usually inexperienced and untrained in the field of teaching English, found it difficult to make the class truly communicative. This situation prompted the change to the present arrangement.

The students who are attending the course are aged between eighteen and twenty-four, and are from various ethnic groups. Because of this ethnic variety, it was essential for the researcher to understand the students' cultural backgrounds in order to find ways to help

them and to enhance their learning. The researcher could then use this knowledge to create a comfortable classroom environment in which students could feel 'safe' enough to try out new things. Underwood (1987) explains that learners will cooperate if they feel that their teacher will help them when they need help, and that they will not be made to feel foolish in front of their classmates. The researcher found this advice essential throughout the project. Other student background information showed that all of the students involved had had two to five years of English classes at school. Even though they had had opportunities to use English before the time of the course, they were not confident enough to freely converse with foreigners. This lack of confidence might have been the result of a language gap which could be observed in them when they were confronted by foreigners at the church. For instance, the researcher observed that they just smiled and walked away. In their research study on "Ethnocentrism, Cultural Traits, Beliefs, and English Proficiency: A Japanese Sample," Hinenoya and Gatbaonton (2000) conclude that shy people are usually less inclined to enter into casual contacts with strangers. Furthermore, they are less likely to avail themselves of opportunities to interact with members of the target language group. As a result, they miss opportunities to further their language learning through heightened interpersonal contact. The entire experience of this project proved this to be equally true of the students at COC.

Objectives of the Study

This research has been undertaken with the following objectives in mind:

1. To find out if positive human relationships in a no-grade context can improve the oral facility of the learners in the classroom.

2. To find out if positive human relationships in a no-grade context can help the learners to communicate more effectively in English in the real world.
3. To get students' opinions on whether grades should be a part of the learning process.

Considering the background of an essentially teacher-centered situation in Thailand, this researcher found that it was appropriate that the aim of the present study was to empower the learners to feel comfortable in communicating in English in real-life situations through positive human relationships, using the Communicative Approach, without threatening assessments. Usually, the students only communicate in English with the teacher (a Thai) and their classmates, but in this study, students had the opportunity to communicate with native speakers of English and speakers of other languages as well. These speakers of other languages were invited to the class to give students experience in communicating in English in a real-life situation. In order to increase students' understanding, the class was conducted in both Thai and English. Grades were not given to any of these activities.

Given the factors of the hierarchical society and the education system in Thailand, the researcher will examine her own approach to the teaching-learning process. This means that, instead of focusing on methodology, syllabuses, and materials, the researcher will be looking into other aspects of this teaching-learning process. She will consider the students (student-centered education), the qualities of the teacher, and the relationship between the teacher and the students.

In light of the Thai education context described in the preceding section, this researcher would like to investigate the following problems:

1. What is the proficiency level in spoken English of the COC first year students upon entry (at the beginning of the term)?

2. Will the participants' proficiency improve after a 30-hour instruction package in basic English that focuses on oral facility in which the teacher employs positive human relationship in concordance with the Communicative Approach?
3. Will the relationship between the teacher and participants improve after the instruction?
4. Is no-grade context helpful to the participants in reducing their anxiety and increasing their motivation in learning?
5. What are the participants' past attitudes and experiences toward the English language, toward English classes, and English teachers? Furthermore, what are their attitudes toward and experiences in the instruction carried out in this study?

Scope of the Study

1. The subjects consisted of 20 first year students at COC.
2. The subjects were from the ethnic groups of Karen, Lahu and Hmong.
3. The teaching methods used were TPR and the Communicative Approach in a no-grade context.
4. The length of the teaching course was 30 hours. The lessons were carried out two times a week in 90-minute periods.
5. The data was collected through pre-test, post-test, interviews, questionnaires and checklists.

Definition of Terms

A no-grade context: An institution which provides English courses for students without competition, grades or credits.

Basic English: Function words and phrases such as common expressions and frequently used idioms required for minimal communication. For example, “I’m sorry,” “Thank you,” “Good morning/afternoon/evening, etc.” “I don’t understand,” “I have got...,” “Excuse me,” etc.

Christian Outreach Center: A Christian church and Bible school (see further details in Chapter 3 p. 34).

Communicative Approach: Language is a system for the expression of meaning; primary function-interaction and communication. Activities involving real communication; carrying out meaningful tasks; and using language which is meaningful to the learner. Objectives will reflect the needs of the learner; they will include functional skills as well as linguistics objectives (Brown 1994, p. 71).

Empower: To enable, to enhance, in this case by giving the tools needed to accomplish a task. If someone is empowered to do something, he/she has authority or power to do it. For instance, when a student is empowered to speak English, he/she will try his/her best to be able to speak English.

Evangelize: To tell people about Jesus Christ.

Ethnic group: Minority language group.

Feel comfortable: to enjoy learning without frustration.

Human relationship: A relation between human beings which results in love, respect, cooperation, unity, happiness and, hopefully, success (Buripakdee 1989 and Munchana 1992).

Pastor : A preacher, in this case a Christian church minister.

Positive human relationship: A kind, friendly, considerate, and encouraging teacher.

Real-life situation: The language used in every day life.

Real world: Extracurricular and informal situations such as meeting the children outside of the class e.g. having a meal together.

Successful learner: Student who seeks out opportunities to communicate in the target language with speakers of other languages than his/her own whenever possible. Wenden (1991) describes successful learners as having positive learning strategies that fit their needs.

Teacher-learner relationship: Munchana (1992) describes two characteristics of the teacher-learner relationship, formal and informal. A teacher has power over a learner in a formal relationship. In an informal relationship, a teacher is a counselor and friend.

Total Physical Response: Basically a structuralist, grammar-based view of language. The theory of learning is that second language learning is the same as first language learning; comprehension before production, is “imprinted” through carrying out commands (right brain functioning); reduction of stress. The objective is to teach oral proficiency to produce learners who can communicate uninhibitedly and intelligibly with native speakers (Brown 1994, p. 71).