

Chapter I

Introduction

Rationale and Significance of the Problem

In Thailand, students learn English as a foreign language. Among the four language skills, reading is probably the most important one because students need to use it as a tool to acquire knowledge which usually comes through English texts. Students who pursue their studies at the university level need to read general textbooks in English in order to gain information required for their studies when the particular texts in Thai are not available to them. Students who aim for vocational training study English for their future careers so they can apply their knowledge in English to read and understand operation manuals of tools, equipment, and machinery, most of which are written in English. Similarly, people who intend to do business need to know English since all kinds of business texts and documents are in English, moreover, they have to use English in communicating with other people all over the world. At present English has become the international language of business. It is used as a tool for people all over the world to communicate with one another, especially in the business section.

Realizing that English is necessary in business, the Vocational Education Department of Thailand, who is responsible for all vocational schools in Thailand, has placed two business English courses into the commercial school curriculum revised in

1995 (The Vocational Education Department of Thailand, 1995). This curriculum is developed to equip students with the necessary skills in the English language so that they can productively work in the business world after they graduate. These students are trained in the four skills of English. Among the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) reading is an essential tool for commercial students. According to Whitehead and Whitehead (1993), "To succeed in business it is essential to read widely, to improve your vocabulary and to assimilate the rules of punctuation so that it becomes second nature to phrase sentences correctly, whether when reading or writing."

The business English courses offered for the commercial students are Tor Sor 012 (Business English I) and Tor Sor 013 (Business English II). The objectives of these courses aim to teach them the skills required in business English, to develop students' ability in using business English, and to improve their reading ability. Also, the Tor Sor 012-013 course description emphasizes English reading practice in different language functions, namely, instructions, faxes, memo, notice, advertisement, E-mail, tables, graphs, and diagrams. Describing the materials used in business and inferring the main ideas of simplified business English letters and documents are included in the curriculum (the Vocational Education Department, 1995.) In order to achieve the above language functions, reading skill is needed.

Because of the reading significance, commercial students are taught to read specific contents from various kinds of business texts, publications, and articles. After teaching business English for many years, the researcher has learned that despite being taught and trained in different reading subskills to understand business English texts, the students have difficulties in understanding those texts. After interviewing several business English teachers in ChiangMai (ChiangMai Commercial College, ChiangMai Vocational College, Sritana Commercial College, and ChiangMai

Rajamongkol Technology College), it can be assumed that commercial students are still weak in English, especially in the reading skills. When reading business English texts, the students cannot understand the vocabulary, the sentences, or the contents of the text.

The cause of the students' problems in reading business English texts may not only come from their lack of reading skills, but also from other factors. One of them may be the students' lack of motivation. If the students are not motivated, they will not be interested in reading the texts. Thongpinit (1996) finds that student motivation can enhance students' achievement in reading.

Another student problem in reading business English texts may be that they do not use appropriate reading strategies. In a study by Thearmtanachock (1999), second-year Payap University students failed in understanding the English texts because they use inappropriate strategies more frequently than appropriate ones.

Yet another is that of poor teaching methods. These should be considered as another reason students cannot read well. In Thailand, English teachers mostly use the Grammar-Translation method and the teacher-centered approach. Teachers emphasize that students memorize, recognize, and translate rather than comprehend written texts. According to Richards (1994), Grammar-Translation creates frustration for students as they have to memorize endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempt to produce perfect translations which cannot help in developing the students' reading competence. Juntawimon (1991) suggests that teachers not encourage students to remember the meaning of vocabulary only, rather, allow the students to guess the answers from context clues, roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Besides, she states, teachers' questions may cause students problems in comprehending English reading texts. Teachers just ask students to find the answers in the text, but not beyond the text. The questions check understanding at the literal

level, consequently, the students do not develop skills for effective reading. White (1996) claims that the students answer questions by copying the answers from the reading text without real understanding of it. Nuttall (1996) suggests that the sort of questions following the reading passage should not be tests of memory. The teachers should encourage their students to read the text and think about it in critical way instead of reading and memorizing only the content they have read.

In addition the curriculum offered is irrelevant to students' needs and does not correspond to a changing society. This may cause the students' failure in reading. Furthermore, teachers who pay more attention to the curriculum rather than to developing students can discourage students in learning to read. This idea is supported by Ellis & Johnson (1994) who claim that making the course relevant to job or study needs and a changing society can enhance the learner.

Lastly, inappropriate teaching materials, especially the textbook, is also considered a possible cause in students' reading failure. According to Wongsuwan (1992), the current reading materials available on Thai market consist only of the text itself and its questions, but does not include any introduction or assistance to the method of acquiring the necessary reading skills. This can cause problems to students to comprehend the English text.

In Vacca's view (1996), problems in reading comprehension occur because of confusion when text information doesn't agree with what the reader already knows. Furthermore, other factors causing problems in reading comprehension is teaching aids. The teaching aids which are on paper-based materials can discourage the students in reading. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), although materials play a crucial role in exposing learners to the language, audio and video cassettes, overhead transparencies, computers, and other equipment or real objects

are also required. Although textbooks are likely to remain a standard in content instruction, it is also likely that there will be increased use of supplementary print materials and technology. The use of computers and other forms of modern technology plays an increasingly important role in studying English. Palmer and Palmer (1994) state that technology can provide up-to-date information for teachers and it can be used as a direct learning tool for students.

Due to globalization, new modern technology such as a CD-ROM and the internet are used more widely by people who want to contact others or even to get some information they required. Students who study business English need to read and get the English information from these sources because the new modern technology can be used to exchange information. Students' lack of motivation, reading strategies, teaching methods, irrelevant curriculum, improper teaching materials, and lack of teaching aids are the current causes of Thai student difficulty in English reading. These affect the students' learning.

The researcher is an English teacher herself so she learns that teachers play a crucial role in guiding students to achieve their learning goals. Good English teachers should be aware of their students' problems in learning English in order to guide the students in mastering needed skills. In teaching reading, the teachers need to know which reading subskills the students lack and which factors prevent them from comprehending the texts. Knowing the students' problems before teaching may help teachers in finding effective teaching methods, in preparing appropriate materials and exercises to suit the students' needs, and in seeking ways to resolve barriers to learning.

Consequently, it is necessary for teachers and curriculum designers to understand student problems and their causes before planning curriculum/syllabuses, teaching methods and approaches, including exercises and teaching materials.

The researcher has decided to study this topic because she has been teaching English in a commercial school and there has not been any studies on the problems of commercial students in reading business English texts in ChiangMai Vocational Schools since the curriculum has been revised in 1995. The researcher wants to find that whether the curriculum which has been revised in 1995 can solve the problems occurred before that. This study will provide great benefits not only for the students but also for the business English teachers and curriculum designers.

The aim of this research is to point out student problems in reading business English texts and to identify the possible factors which affect the student's comprehension in reading business English texts.

The researcher had selected to study the first-year higher commercial students as subjects of this study because they have already taken these two business English courses (Tor Sor 012 and Tor Sor 013) which are compulsory for third-year lower commercial students. It can be assumed that students have already learned to apply needed skills in reading business English texts before they come to this level.

The results from the study will reveal subskills students have difficulty with in reading business English texts and the factors which cause student failure in reading. Such information if taken seriously can lead to the improvement of curriculum, teaching approaches, teaching techniques, teaching aids, and classroom environment.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to investigate the commercial students' problems in reading business English texts and the factors which cause their reading problems.

Significance of the Study

1. The result of this study will help business English teachers and curriculum/syllabus designers realize the students' problems in reading business English texts and then look for possible solutions to each particular problem indicated by the study.
2. The teachers will learn what factors affect the students' achievement and/or failure in reading business English texts, and they will find a way to resolve the problems causing these failures.
3. The results of this study will activate a greater interest on the part of the administrators in the Vocational Education Department of Thailand in deciding if the curriculum presently used (APPENDIX A-B) is relevant to the field of business so that curriculum revision and improvement can proceed.

Scope of the Study

1. This study is confined specifically to the first-year higher level students at four commercial schools in Amphur Muang, ChiangMai who had taken Tor Sor 012-013 (Business English courses) in the 1998 academic year, namely, ChiangMai Commercial College, ChiangMai Vocational College, ChiangMai Rajamongkol Technology College, and Sritana Commercial College.
2. The study is aimed at identifying the problems in reading business English texts and the factors which cause the problems.
3. The reading subskills in a comprehension test are focused on five reading skills: guessing unfamiliar words, recognizing general business vocabulary, determining main ideas, identifying factual details, and inferring information from the text.

4. The questionnaire given to the students is focused on two parts as follows:
 - 4.1 The first part focuses on the student's self-evaluation of the reading difficulty.
 - 4.2 The second part focuses on the student's opinion about the factors which affect his/her learning.
5. The factors emphasized five things: students themselves, teachers, teaching aids, teaching techniques, and environments.
6. The interview is conducted with ten English teachers of the four target schools who have been teaching business English courses (Tor Sor 012-013).

Definition of the Terms

1. *Problems in reading business English texts* refers to the difficulty in comprehending the text the students read because of their lack of a mastery of reading skills in business English.
2. *Difficulties* refers to the students' inability to understand the reading material in business English texts.
3. *Reading subskills* means the subskills in reading consisting of guessing unfamiliar words from context, recognizing general business vocabulary, determining main ideas of a text, identifying factual details within a text, and inferring information in a text.
4. *Guessing unfamiliar words* refers to guessing the meanings of unfamiliar words wisely by analyzing word parts (prefixes, affixes, or suffixes), by using context clues (definition, explanation, or illustration), and by using dictionary wisely and effectively.
5. *Recognizing general business vocabulary* refers to the ability to remember the meaning of the general business English words that students have learned or experienced. When they see those words again in other texts, they can recall their meanings.

6. *Determining main ideas* refers to finding topic words or key words, distinguishing general and specific ideas and identifying paragraph organization in order to determine what the text is about.
7. *Identifying factual details* refers to finding the factual information stated in the text.
8. *Inferring information in the text* refers to finding the information in the text students are reading which is not stated in the text directly by the writer.
9. *Factors* refers to those barriers that cause difficulty which block students' reading comprehension. The possible factors in this study are the learners themselves, the teachers, the classroom environment, the teaching techniques, and the teaching aids.
10. *Business English texts* refers to business publications such as letters, advertisements, articles, including business English textbooks used by the four target commercial schools in Amphur Muang, ChiangMai, namely, Rajamongkol Technology College, ChiangMai Commercial College, Sritana Commercial College, and ChiangMai Vocational College.
11. *The reading comprehension test* is a set of questions focusing on the five reading comprehension subskills: guessing the meanings of the unfamiliar words from context, recognizing general business vocabulary, determining the main idea of a text, identifying factual details within text, and inferring information from textual clues.
12. *Tor Sor 012-013* refers to the two required business English courses for the third-year lower commercial students majoring in accounting and marketing at commercial schools in Thailand.

13. *Commercial students* refers to the students at the four target commercial schools in Amphur Muang, ChiangMai who have already taken the two business English courses (Tor Sor 012-013) in the 1998 academic year.

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