CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Rationale and Statement of the Problem

Due to the globalization era, much attention has been given to foreign language especially the English Language. Across the world, oral and aural proficiencies in English have been accepted as a valuable asset for non-native speakers who want to succeed professionally as well as academically. In recognizing this important fact, schools and higher education institutions have tried to find the best way to accomplish this great task. Yet for many decades, finding suitable methods for teaching English is still continuing to be a much discussed issue.

In Widdowson's article, "The Teaching of English as Communication" cited in Brumfit and Johnson (1979), he raised the problem of students' using English language inefficiently as a means of communication in daily situations.   The lack of adequate performance by the students becomes an increasing problem as students continue their education at the tertiary level. At this level,

students must have adequate English competency in order to successfully study and pass many required English courses (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979). Since these English courses are prerequisites for other future courses, not passing them might lead to disadvantages for students.

From past to present, a solution was derived to accommodate the students' lack of sufficient speaking skills. Many oral courses have been designed based on the communicative approach to help students to be able to communicate. Little, Devitt and Singleton (Swarbrick, 1994) defined the communicative approach with the distinctive feature of emphasizing the language as a means of communication in every state from setting objectives to evaluation. The main goal for the communicative approach is to get students involved in practicing the target language (Swarbrick, 1994).

For over two decades the communicative approach dominated syllabus design (Silberstein, 1993). The concept of using the communicative approach for English courses has been implemented in many higher education institutions. Like many other institutions all over the world, Chiang Mai University has also followed this path. However, from the latest study of Architecture students at Chiang Mai

University, much improvement is needed in the area of

communication skills (Kheaunsri, 2003). From students' interviews,

observations of their performances in class and during final exams in

the first and second semester of the academic year 2002 in course

001310 (Oral Expression II), the researcher found a lack of

proficiency in communication. More was needed to be done for

students who wish to learn but have a low level of speaking -listening

skills in English. Although the present communicative syllabus

consists of activities that provide opportunities for students to practice

their speaking skills, those who lack the ability and confidence might

perhaps benefit more from language patterns that they were able to

come up with in class in reflections of their performances.

For the past 10 years, many studies concerning students' lack of

competency in using English have been conducted to find ways to

help students improve. Many of these studies investigated the

implementation of a task-based approach to help students improve

their abilities to use English confidently. Worrajitti (1991) discovered

that a task-based approach assisted students and teachers to get more

involved in the learning process. Toapichattrakul (1991) found that

through a task-based teaching method, first year Agricultural students

at Chiang Mai Agricultural College gained more confidence and their motivation increased. In Wattanamra's research (1996), second year students from the Royal Thai Air Force Academy improved in all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing through the use of task-based activities. In a more recent research by Sommit (2002) we learned that the listening and speaking skills of hotel service personnel could be improved through task-based learning.

The researcher believes that by encouraging the learners to become more involved in creating their own responses in a given situation, the more confident they will become when using the target language in a real world setting. With the purpose of promoting students' creativity in class, the researcher proposes to create activities adapted from Willis's task-based framework. The TBL (task-based learning) framework consists of 3 stages (Willis, 1996):

1. Pre-task: A review activity is given to students to check their previous knowledge on the topic.

2. Task cycle: There are two stages:

    2.1 Planning: Students study the skills/strategy needed to perform tasks.

    2.2 Report: Students perform in front of class.

3.   Language Focus: There are two stages:

    3.1   Teacher assessment: Examining

    students' strengths/weaknesses.

    3.2   Peer assessment: Reinforcing previous

    knowledge and strengthening social skills in

    helping classmates.

Besides using Willis's task-based learning framework, the researcher will add two activities which are pre tests before the pre-task stage and reflection writing after the language focus stage. It is hoped that through task-based activities, students will excel in communicative competence.

1.2   Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore the effects of task-based learning activities on speaking - listening skills of undergraduate students at Chiang Mai University.

1.3 Objectives of the Research

The objectives of this research were:

1. To implement lessons using task-based learning activities to promote speaking - listening skills of undergraduate students at Chiang Mai University.

2. To compare speaking - listening skills of undergraduate students at Chiang Mai University before and after using task-based learning activities.

1.4 Statement of Hypothesis

After using task-based learning activities, the students' speaking -listening skills would increase.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is as follows:

1.5.1 Target group

The subjects of this study was a group of 13 undergraduate students who took course 001310 (Oral Expression II) section 4 at Chiang Mai University during the first semester of the academic year 2003.

The time for conducting this research was between June and September 2003.

1.5.2 Content

The researcher implemented lessons from course 001310 (Oral Expression II) developed by the English Department, Chiang Mai University.

1.5.3 Variables

Independent Variables:

Lessons using task-based activities

Dependent Variables:

Students' English speaking - listening skills

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The target group consisted of Chiang Mai undergraduate students from different faculties resulting in a diversity of background knowledge. The total time for the experiment was confined to one full semester.

1.7 Definitions of Terms

1.7.1 Task-based activities refer to activities used for giving students more opportunity to use and practice speaking - listening skills based on Willis's 3 stages of task-based learning framework:

1.7.1.1 Pre-task

In this stage, the teacher gives a review to students to check their previous knowledge about the topic.

1.7.1.2 Task cycle

The students study the patterns, plan their strategy and perform tasks.

1.7.1.3 Language focus

After having teacher and peer assessments, each pair of students reflects on their performances based on feedback from other pairs and finds solution to their problems.

1.7.2 Speaking - Listening skills refers to the ability to verbally express ideas and feelings and the ability to hear and comprehend the meaning of utterances. Speaking - listening assessment will be done by an interview.

1.8   Significance of the Study

The researcher expects the following benefits from this research:

1.   To help the instructor gain proper techniques in using

task-based activities to promote students' speaking -

listening skills.

2.   To be a guideline for future implementation of English

oral courses.