CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This work aims to investigate participants' interaction when engaged in language learning tasks. It assesses the effectiveness of two collaborative language learning tasks used to help participants enhance their accuracy in the simple past tense and their use of vocabulary.

This chapter includes information about the rationale and statement of the problem, purposes of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and definition of terms.

Rationale and Statement of Problem

A language learning task is an activity which requires students to use language with emphasis on meaning and to attain an objective (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001). Language learning tasks also require students to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought (Prabhu, 1987 cited by Ellis 2003). Tasks have an important role in language learning classrooms since they can help students to improve their language skills. Ellis (2003) states that tasks hold a central place in current second language acquisition (SLA) research and also in

language pedagogy. They encourage students to participate within their groups and interact with their peers and teachers. They can promote communication among the students, so the students can practice speaking skills. Ellis (2003) also suggests that if students are to develop competence in using a second language easily and effectively in the kinds of situations they meet outside the classroom, they need to experience how language is used as a tool for communicating inside it. Tasks serve as one means for organizing teaching along these lines. The suggestion is that teachers should implement tasks which have the goal of allowing students to practice using the target language. The students can then apply things that they have learnt in class to use for communicating in their daily lives. Collaborative tasks are one kind of task that can create interaction and can promote communication among the students and thus may help students to improve their target language skills.

According to Nunan (1992), collaboration encourages students to learn about learning and to learn better. Collaboration also increases their awareness about language, self, and about learning strategies and learning styles. Collaborative tasks require students to negotiate meaning and sentence structures and forms that are suited to their language development. Hertz-Lazarowitz and Miller (1992) support the ideas of Nunan (1992). They state that as individuals verbally

exchange ideas during a collaborative task, they create opportunities to use vocabulary that directs and controls problem-solving behavior. After interacting with others in learning situations, learners gradually internalize the supportive other role and begin to perform these regulatory behaviors for themselves. A number of researchers have studied the effects of language learning through collaborative tasks (e.g. Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis 2003; Nunan, 1992; Swain & Lapkin, 1998), with findings tending to support the view that collaborative tasks can enhance students' language learning. The suggestion from the researchers is that collaborative tasks are one option that teachers can select in order to create interaction in class.

In language learning, grammar - the description of the ways in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language - is an important aspect of language that students have to learn. According to Brown (1994), the teaching of grammar has always been a central aspect of foreign language teaching. "For centuries, in fact, the only activity of language classrooms was the study of grammar" (Brown, 1994, p. 347). English grammar is a basic part of language that students have to learn, and is linked to the development of all four skills. Brown (1994) also states that grammar rules are one

of the supporting foundations for communication. If grammar rules are too carelessly violated, communication may suffer.

In Thailand, grammar teaching often takes the form of presenting and practicing isolated rules, and paradigms and manipulating form rather than relating form to function. Based on informal interviews with Thai EFL teachers with many experience years in teaching English, grammar rules and vocabulary are still frequently presented to the class in isolation. The students have to memorize the rules and vocabulary for doing examinations, but they do not have a chance to learn the rules through collaborative tasks. For example students learn only the structure rules of tenses, but they do not have a chance to learn how each tense applied to communication in their daily lives. Interaction among students rarely appears in Thai classrooms.

The Ministry of Education (2003) has stated that according to Thai Educational Reform, English language teaching should place an emphasis on language for communication, with student-centered learning being promoted for the Thai classroom. The aim is that students do not only remember vocabulary and language structures, but they can also use language to communicate with other people efficiently. In other words, students should not only learn the English language as a system, or study English as a tool for understanding and learning about

American or British cultural values, but they have to learn it as a tool for communication.

Based on an evaluation of the students' quality of English learning from many educational institutions, it was found that Thai students from elementary to secondary schools (Grade 1-12) have lower proficiency than the standards that the Ministry of Education set. It may be that the low attainment in English in Thailand comes from problems in teaching processes which did not develop students in accordance with the standards of Thai economic and social policy (Ministry of Education, 2000). One option in teaching language is to provide and implement various activities into class. The activities should have the goal of developing students' accuracy and fluency, and also let students find their own language learning strategies. This will lead to learner independence and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2003). Using tasks in class might help to develop students' language learning proficiency.

Purposes of Study

In this study, two collaborative tasks – jigsaw and dictogloss tasks– are assessed for their effectiveness at encouraging collaborative dialogue and enhancing accuracy in using the simple past tense and vocabulary of secondary school students.

Jigsaw and dictogloss are tasks that generate talk when students are engaged in linguistic problem solving. They are done collaboratively, and involve the production of a spoken and written text (Swain & Lapkin, 2001), so the students will have a chance to interact and participate with their peers. Moreover, while they are doing the tasks, they share knowledge about the form of verb tenses, the function of words, sentence structure, and vocabulary.

The main aim of this research is to study the effectiveness of these collaborative tasks, jigsaw and dictogloss tasks. The study, therefore, is a follow-up of work by Swain and Lapkin (2001) where two similar tasks were investigated. This research aims to achieve four objectives. The first objective is to study the difference in language-related episodes (LREs), both lexis-based LREs and form-based LREs, between the participants from two different groups, Group J (jigsaw task), and Group D (dictogloss task). According to Swain and Lapkin (2001) LREs are defined as any part of a dialogue where students talk about language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct their language production. In this way, the students reflect consciously on the language they are producing, and this reflection may be a source of language learning. The second objective is to assess learning by comparing the score of pre- and post-tests between the two groups of participants. The results of

the scores from the core pre- and post- tests indicate the students' progression in language learning by using tasks.

The third objective is to study the relationship between the collaborative dialogue that emerges when participants were doing tasks and language learning. For this objective, learning is measured by tailor-made post-test scores, using post-test items prepared following an analysis of the collaborative dialogue between pairs of learners. The test contained three item types; type (A) items where the pairs came to correct decision, type (B) items where the pairs did not agree about the linguistic problem, type (c) items where the pairs came to an incorrect decision. The last objective was to study the difference of the quality of written narratives between the participants from the two different groups.

Research Questions

The objectives above can be stated as the following research questions:

1. Is there any difference in language-related episodes, lexis-based LREs and form-based LREs (see the definition on p. 11) of participants from the two different groups: Group J and Group D?

2. Is there a difference in the performance of Groups J and D in the post-test?

3. Is there a relationship between the collaborative dialogue that emerges when participants are doing tasks and language learning as assessed by performance on tailor-made post-test items?

4. Is there any difference in the quality of written narrative of the participants from the two different groups?

Significance of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore and compare the effects of using collaborative tasks, jigsaw and dictogloss tasks to enhance accuracy in using the simple past tense and vocabulary of secondary school students. There are many studies concerning the effectiveness of collaborative tasks in the language classroom (Nunan 1992; Ellis 2003; Mattos 2000; Swain & Lapkin 2001), but it is rare to find a study which implemented collaborative tasks in Thai classrooms. Since collaborative tasks have many potential advantages in language learning as mentioned earlier, it is of interest to research the implementation of collaborative tasks in this context. The findings of the study may provide information that is useful in improving aspects of secondary education in Thailand. First, the findings from the research will provide further information on the effects of jigsaw and

dictogloss tasks in EFL classrooms, adding to research already carried out by Swain and Lapkin (2001). Second, the findings from data analysis of LREs and the quality of written narratives will help teachers in developing suitable tasks for their classes. Last, the research result may raise the awareness of the value of teachers using tasks that promote collaborative talk about language in EFL classrooms.

<div align="center">Definition of Terms</div>

Jigsaw task

Jigsaw task is one kind of two-way information gap task. In two-way information gap tasks, all the participants are obligated to participate in order to complete the task. Swain and Lapkin (2001) define the jigsaw task as a task where the input material is divided between two or more participants such that they are required to exchange information to complete the task. It is a task where one participant holds information that the other participant does not have and that must be exchanged in order to complete the task. For example, pictures making up

a story are divided between students. The students are required to construct the story told by the pictures by looking only at the cards they themselves hold, and explain the content of their pictures to the group. Typically the students work through the cards sequentially, alternately telling each other what their pictures contain. Then they write the story.

Dictogloss task   Dictogloss refers to a collaborative task that requires learners to listen to and reconstruct a short text specially designed to focus attention on a specific grammatical feature (Wajnryb, 1990). The dictogloss task involves students listening to a passage read to them twice, at normal speed. Each student takes notes on its content, and then works with his or her partner to reconstruct the passage in a writing format based on the two sets of notes.

Collaborative dialogue Collaborative dialogue refers to the talk that enables learners to produce spoken or written texts collaboratively while performing a task.

Language-related episodes Language-related episodes (LREs) are defined as any part of a dialogue where students talk about language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct their language production (e.g., modification or clarification request.) LREs thus entail discussion of meaning and form (Swain & Lapkin, 2001).

Lexis-based LREs Lexis-based LREs are the parts of dialogue that involve students searching for vocabulary and / or choosing among competing vocabulary items.

Form-based LREs Form-based LREs are the parts of dialogue that involve students focusing on spelling or on an aspect of morphology, syntax or discourse.

Written narrative   Written narrative is the written

                           production text that the students write

                           as a part of jigsaw and dictogloss

                           tasks.