

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale for the study

I taught college English at South China Agricultural University (SCAU) in China. Presently I am enrolled in Master courses at Prince of Songkla University (PSU) in Thailand. Coming from one culture to another, I became very interested in observable differences between the two cultures in their English language teaching practices and learning environments. When I did my English teaching practicum at PSU, I observed that most Thai students did not carry a dictionary with them to the classroom, whereas in China almost all my students at SCAU brought a dictionary or a vocabulary handbook with them to the English classroom. Curiosity drove me to find out how students in the two different learning environments attained the English vocabulary and whether there were similarities or differences in their vocabulary knowledge.

I continued to compare various aspects of the learning contexts in the two countries as outlined in Tables 1.1 and 1.2. An idea then occurred that it might be interesting and pedagogically significant to conduct a comparative study of the vocabulary knowledge of students learning English as a foreign language in the two countries.

Table 1.1 Comparison of English language teaching and learning situations in Thailand and China

<i>Aspects of comparison</i>	<i>Thailand</i>	<i>China</i>
<i>Present syllabus for the primary school level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Basic Education Curriculum (2001) points out that the vocabulary level. i.e., 1,050-1,200 words for primary school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is no specific syllabus. However, children in the big cities may start to learn English at this level. In the countryside children will not learn English until they enter junior secondary school.

Table 1.1 (Continued)

<i>Aspects of comparison</i>	<i>Thailand</i>	<i>China</i>
<i>Present syllabus for secondary school level:</i> (1) Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Basic Education Curriculum (2001) offers the guidelines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows the Chinese Syllabus for Junior and Senior Secondary Schools (1993) more rigidly. Formal instruction of English as a foreign language begins at junior secondary school at the age of about 12-13.
(2) Vocabulary requirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Basic Education Curriculum (2001) points out different vocabulary levels. i.e., 2,100-2,250 words for junior secondary school; 3,600-3,750 words for the senior secondary school (The Ministry of Education, Thailand, 2001). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The national syllabus (1993) has stipulated the words to be taught at each stage. i.e., 614 words: for junior secondary school; 1,929 words: for senior secondary school.
(3) Textbooks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools have considerable freedom to choose their own materials, teaching styles, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Textbooks compiled by domestic writers based on the national curriculum are widely used.
(4) Length of exposure to English instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 years of secondary school instruction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 years of secondary school instruction.
(5) Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exam-oriented. Mainly instrumental motivation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exam-oriented. Mainly instrumental motivation.

Table 1.2 Comparison of English language teaching and learning situations at PSU and SCAU

<i>Aspects of comparison</i>	<i>PSU, Thailand</i>	<i>SCAU, China</i>
(1) subjects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undergraduates/Finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undergraduates/Finance
(2) Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loose guidelines set by Ministry of University Affairs (2001). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows the National Curriculum for Chinese College English (1999) fairly rigidly.

Table 1.2 (Continued)

<i>Aspects of comparison</i>	<i>PSU, Thailand</i>	<i>SCAU, China</i>
(3) Vocabulary requirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No specific number of words for PSU students to learn. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The national syllabus has stipulated the words to be taught as passive recognition vocabulary or active vocabulary. i.e. 4,200 words (for passive recognition and among them 2,500 words for active use): namely Band 4 requirement for the lower proficient non-English majors and SCAU follows this requirement. 6,000 words (for passive recognition): namely Band 6 requirement for the higher proficiency non-English majors.
(4) Length of exposure to English instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foundation English (FE) courses---one year. ● After one-year FE courses, some students will take General English, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, the number of which depends on the requirements of different faculties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foundation English courses --- two years. ● After the two-year FE courses, students will take EAP courses, the number of which depends on the requirements of different faculties. (There is not enough teaching staff for ESP at present.)
(5) FE courses (5.1) Teaching hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● About 90 teaching hours (50 minutes in one teaching hour) in one year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● About 230 teaching hours (45 minutes in one teaching hour) in two years.
(5.2) Textbooks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monolingual commercial textbook published by Cambridge University Press and written by native speakers (Richards et al., 1998). ● Key vocabulary and expressions for each unit listed at the back of students' book without any glossing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bilingual textbooks (especially in the word list and expressions part) compiled by domestic authors based on the national curriculum. ● Key words and expressions listed right after the main reading texts with both L1 and L2 glossing. Example sentences of some important words given with L1 translation.

Table1.2 (Continued)

<i>Aspects of comparison</i>	<i>PSU, Thailand</i>	<i>SCAU, China</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● According to the key word list of the textbooks, 781 words must be learned by PSU students in one year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● According to the key word list of the textbooks, 1,596 words must be learned by SCAU students in the first year.
<i>(5.3) Class size</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● About 30-40 students in one class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● About 64 students in one class.
<i>(5.4) How students learn vocabulary</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students learn vocabulary through a variety of activities and through individual practice. Learners are encouraged to apply the language they have learned. Compared with SCAU students in SCAU, PSU students in PSU have more time for active use of vocabulary in speaking and writing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students learn vocabulary mainly through intensive reading (Yang, 2000). The active use of vocabulary is neglected due to the large class size, large amount of language points to be explained and a negative washback of the objective parts in their tests.
<i>(5.5) Testing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No National College English Test. There are more subjective parts in the testing style than are focused in China. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● After the two-year FE courses, students will take a Norm-Referenced Test---National College English Test Band 4 (CET4) for non-English majors. The students who score above 80 percentile are qualified to take the National Oral Test. If they have passed CET4, they can try to pass National College English Test Band 6 (CET6) for non-English majors.
<i>(5.6) Motivation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Exam-oriented. Mainly instrumental motivation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Exam-oriented. Mainly instrumental motivation. However, as the certificates of CET4 and CET6 are very useful when they hunt for a job, most students are highly motivated to study English.

1.2 Significance of the study

With China being one of the members in the World Trade Organization, both passive and active use of English in communication becomes more and more prominent. As a member in the global village, Thailand faces a similar situation. Modern communication especially via the Internet requires both passive and active use of English. We not only read or listen to information passively but also react to it actively either through speaking or writing. The free active use of English--- especially writing--- is playing a more and more important role in communication. Krashen and Terrel (1983) stated that vocabulary is basic to communication. Therefore, to determine how much vocabulary learners know passively, how much vocabulary learners can potentially produce, and how much vocabulary learners can freely produce in a writing task such as e-mail writing, would be of great pedagogical value to the two countries, especially to the two universities concerned.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study was to compare the passive and active vocabulary knowledge of the EFL learners at PSU and SCAU. Results of such a comparison would hold useful pedagogical implications for the EFL teaching and learning practices. For example, knowledge of students' vocabulary size would provide implications for a realistic goal for a lexical syllabus and could offer direction for effective curriculum design. Through a comparative study of vocabulary knowledge attained by EFL learners at tertiary level in two different countries and two different curricula, it is hoped that we, English teachers and students, can learn from each other.

1.4 Limitations

It is impossible for this study to generalize the vocabulary knowledge of all Chinese and Thai university students. It is also impossible for this study to discuss at length about all the pre-university learning stages since the subjects came from various

middle school backgrounds. However, the results would make it possible to investigate the students' vocabulary knowledge under different curricula in the two universities in different countries and would, to a certain extent, make it possible to discuss the results by focusing on their present learning stage--- university stage.