

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

As global communications among people has increased, English has become the first choice for cross-border communication world wide. English is the language most widely taught as a foreign language in more than 100 countries in the world. In Thailand, English is not the official language, it is taught as a foreign language from primary level to higher education. For primary education, the main contents of the English curriculum (Educational Technique Department, 2002) include: a) English for communication that emphasizes capability to use the four basic skills for communication in English (listening, speaking, reading and writing), b) English and culture that link both Thai and English languages and cultures together especially for the understanding of the western culture, c) the association of English with other subjects that stress the use of English as a principal means to link with other subjects, and d) the relationship among English, communities and the world societies that focus on the capability to use English in daily situations in school, communities, and the world societies.

Regarding the higher education, as the requirement of English skills is needed for graduates, the English courses were organized in order to improve their English proficiency especially for communication. Though, Thai students have been spending times learning English not less than ten years, they still have competence which is far below that of native speakers.

The research of Chaisrisook (2003), examined the problems in usage of English for communication and study skills of students in Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University. The results indicated that the students' problems in using English for communication and their study skills were at the higher level. The causes of their problems were, for example, the opportunity in using English in daily life, the interest in reading and searching from English texts. Mawan et al (2006) found that the important problems in learning English of the students were their limited vocabulary knowledge, misunderstanding in complicated sentences, and speaking problem. Furthermore, Wuthiwai et al (2003) reported that the undergraduate students at Prince of Songkla University thought that the most difficult part of learning English was vocabulary. In addition, the problems of learning English of the students were listening, speaking, writing, and reading, respectively.

Vocabulary is important in learning to read and strongly related to reading comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is notified as a contribution towards reading success. To achieve reading competence and enhance reading comprehension, language learners should have a vocabulary acquisition. To understand a text not only requires the ability to read words but also the word meaning. Additionally, vocabulary is appropriate in predicting reading comprehension. Regarding the English reading problems, Thai students still have encountered the limitations of vocabulary.

From the above studies, it concluded that a problem in learning English that caused the achievement in English proficiency was vocabulary knowledge. Then, it was interested in investigating the English Vocabulary Skill of undergraduate students who have attended the English class for not less than ten years. Moreover, the factors affecting English Vocabulary Skill were also included in this study.

1.2 Objectives

1. To examine the English Vocabulary Skill Test scores of undergraduate students at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus.
2. To investigate the factors affecting English Vocabulary Skill of undergraduate students at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus.

1.3 Literature Review

As many research reported the language learners, especially in Thailand, had low achievement in English proficiency (Prapphal and Opanon-Amata, 2002, Wuthiwai et al, 2003, and Qian, 2002).

Thai graduates had lower achievement in English proficiency than the international standard required for further studies at graduate level abroad, reported by Prapphal and Opanon-Amata (2002). For the English proficiency among the graduates in the areas of science and humanities and social sciences, the average score of graduates in the areas of science was higher than those in the areas of humanities and social sciences.

Wuthiwai et al (2003) studied about the attitudes towards studying English of the students at Prince of Songkla University. They found that the students had got positive attitudes towards learning English. They thought English was useful and important in their study (academic life). Reading skill was the most important skill for this group of students. The English reading problems resulted from the limited vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary knowledge was found to be a main problem for learning English, particularly related to the reading ability.

Qian (2002) investigated the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic reading performance. The result presented that the vocabulary knowledge both breadth; the number of words, and depth; knowing the meaning of words, was useful in predicting performance on the reading comprehension. It also confirmed that vocabulary factor was important in reading assessment.

To explore the reading behavior of the undergraduates, Kaewklom (2002) found that the frequency of the English reading of the first year English major students at Rajabhat Institute Ubon Ratchathani was at the moderate level in both academic and non-academic material. Also the problem areas in reading English included the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar.

The students' problem on vocabulary knowledge was also shown in the report of Ward (2000) under titled the students' proficiency in reading subject-specialist textbook in English at Suranaree University of Technology. It indicated that the students knew only slightly less than half of the 2,000 necessary words.

In addition, Chaisuriya (2006) examined the English reading problems of graduates of Business, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Burapha University, it showed that the graduates graded themselves C in English ability. For English reading, they often read e-mail, website content, short notes, product details, academic texts, manuals, and reports. The high level rank in English reading problems was the limited vocabulary.

Furthermore, the analytical study of Humanities and Social Sciences students' problems in reading English (Suknantapong et al, 2002) was identified the problems in reading English of the students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Prince of Songkla University. The result presented that the students had positive attitudes towards reading English but they spent very little reading time out of class. They also performed poorly in reading ability. From six reading skills concerning context clues, sentence study, main ideas, details, interpretation and inference, the poorest skills of the students were inference and determining context clues. Moreover, Humanities students performed significantly better than Social Sciences students in all reading skills.

The paper of Ransdell (2004) was focused on predicting academic success among monolingual and bilingual psychology students graduating from an American university in South Florida. It found that the English test score of monolingual students were better than bilingual students in terms of receptive vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing fluency. However, in grammar awareness, expressive vocabulary, vocabulary density and writing quality, both monolingual and bilingual students were equivalent. The best predictors of reading comprehension skill among monolingual students were grammar awareness, and both receptive and expressive vocabulary.

Zhiying et al (2007) compared the vocabulary knowledge between the students at Prince of Songkla University (PSU) and South China Agricultural University (SCAU). The study focused on three-modality vocabulary knowledge: 1) passive recognition, defined as understanding its meaning, 2) active recall, referred to providing an equivalent second language translation of and first language word and 3) free active

written, defined as spontaneous use of a word. The result demonstrated that the SCAU students utilized a larger active recall and free active written vocabulary knowledge than PSU students. Both PSU and SCAU students showed low productive vocabulary knowledge.

1.4 Definition of terms

English Vocabulary Skill is the ability in completing the English Vocabulary Skill Test of the undergraduate students at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus.

English Vocabulary Skill Test is the test that was used to measure the English Vocabulary Skill of the undergraduate students at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus.

Prince of Songkla University
Pattani Campus