CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale for the Study

English is the most widely taught and used language that the world has ever known. In Thailand, English is taught as a foreign language. It is taught as a school subject, but is not used as a medium of instruction in schools or as a language in everyday life. However, with the advent of globalisation, English is becoming more widely used in the country. Nowadays English plays an important role in various areas such as education, economy, computer, technology, employment, international relations, and especially, communication. Because of this important role, English teachers want to enable their students to produce and understand spoken and written language outside the classroom.

It is obvious that speaking as a means of communication provides speakers with some advantages over writers. When speaking, the speakers have a chance to explain, repeat or employ other devices such as gestures and stress to help their listeners understand what they are saying. In writing, on the other hand, the writers must write clearly and accurately since they do not have those extra opportunities that speakers have. Cope and Kalantzis; Devine; Harmer; Kress, 1988 (all cited in Lush, 2002) and Hedge (1988) state that written English requires much greater grammatical accuracy than spoken English because it is not possible for the writers to explain or clarify their intended meaning to the readers verbally or through other devices such as facial expression, gestures or intonation when they cannot understand the intended meaning of the written words.

1

To make the writing comprehensible to the reader, writers have to be aware of grammatical accuracy, word choice, organisation of ideas, and so on. Hedge (1988: 5) states that "compared to speech, effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organisation in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers."

Sontaya Anakasiri (1986: 2) states that "the reason for the students to learn to write effectively is to communicate a variety of ideas, thoughts, feelings, impressions and propositions to others." Olshtain (2001: 213) affirms that "writing, in addition to being a communicative skill of vital importance, is a skill which enables the learner to plan and rethink the communication process. It therefore provides the learner with the opportunity to focus on both linguistic accuracy and content organisation." Mckay (1994) proposes that there are four main reasons for second language learners to write in English: to develop knowledge or schemata, to be able to use rhetorical patterns, to increase social awareness and to develop language.

Olsen (1999) states that when communicating in a target language learners are often lacking in the means to say or write what they intend to. This is congruent with what is stated by Simpson (2000), that language learners are frequently worried about the prospect of writing in English. They worry about paragraph writing, and expressing their ideas distinctly with regard to correct usage, grammar, spelling and punctuation. In general, most Thai learners of English as a foreign language usually find it difficult to express their ideas in writing. Although they have been exposed to the English language for many years, they have still not mastered the writing skill.

Writing is difficult not only for non-native speakers of English but also for native speakers. Celce-Murcia (2001: 204) states that "the ability to express one's

ideas in writing in a second or foreign language and to do so with reasonable coherence and accuracy is a major achievement; many native speakers of English never truly master this skill in their own language."

According to Supasiri Hongrittipun (1990), language learners usually consider writing as a task which demands much time and effort, but which produces little effect. They spend much time on writing and try to convey their intended meaning. However, they sometimes find it difficult to communicate effectively. Readers cannot clearly understand their writing because it contains a great number of errors. This notion is in accord with Olshtain (2001: 207), who states:

> Linguistic accuracy, clarity of presentation, and organisation of ideas are all crucial in the efficacy of the communicative act, since they supply the clues for interpretation. Accordingly, while the global perspectives of content and organisation need to be focused on and given appropriate attention, it is also most important to present a product which does not suffer from illegible handwriting, numerous spelling errors, faulty punctuation, or inaccurate structure, any of which may render the message unintelligible.

It is noteworthy that Thai learners' extensive exposure to English instruction has failed to make them able to achieve a desirable writing ability. This information is supported by the results of many studies on errors in students' writing conducted by Charas Ubol (1979); Suphat Sukamolsun (1980); Kim (1983); Suttirat Rujikiatgumjorn and Somchoen Chiewkul (1987); Suwannee Lukanavanich (1988); Bamrung Torut (1997) and Lush (2002). These researchers found that Thai learners of English produced writing errors in three main categories: (1) grammatical or structural errors, i.e. articles, tenses, subject-verb agreement and prepositions, (2) lexical errors, and (3) errors of style use.

Errors are an important part of the language learning and teaching processes. They are valuable, necessary and unavoidable (Adisa Teo, 1986; Sontaya Anakasiri, 1986; Burke, 1999; Hedge, 2000). However, some learners may think errors are unacceptable and they tend to avoid using the language in situations where they are

not certain if they can use it correctly. They use only simple patterns or structures. As a result, their language skills are not developed. Therefore, language teachers should help change their attitude from being afraid of making errors to having more confidence in producing language. This notion is in accordance with Yaowaret Ketkaew (2000) who states that learners should perceive the importance of errors and teachers should sympathetically react to learners' errors and also try to find ways to help them reduce their errors.

Learners' errors are important and essential sources of information to language teachers because they can be used as a guideline for designing the proper teaching materials to improve teaching strategies and classroom techniques, particularly for a writing class (Charas Ubol, 1979). For learners, their errors indicate their progress in the process of learning the target language (Supasiri Hongrittipun, 1990). Due to the importance of learners' errors to language learning and teaching, analysing errors is helpful for both learners and teachers. According to Sharma (1981: 21), error analysis is "a process based on analysis of learners' errors with one clear objective: evolving a suitable and effective teaching-learning strategy and remedial measures necessary in certain clearly marked out areas of the foreign language." It provides teachers in a second/foreign language setting with useful information on students' errors which may be caused by L1 interference, teaching methods and so on. In other words, language teachers who conduct their own research on error analysis can discover why their learners make errors. They can also build up a picture of the frequency of types of errors. Then they can plan appropriate lessons or teaching techniques which can help decrease the number of learners' errors and develop their writing skills.

In the Thai context, although English is taught as a foreign language, students are encouraged to communicate in English in writing. However, they produce a number of errors in their written tasks which lead to confusion and misunderstanding, or even worse, incomprehensibility. As known, global errors cause difficulty in

understanding students' intended meaning while local errors usually do not. Thus, it would be necessary to employ error analysis of students' written works in order to study what types of errors occur most frequently and what types of errors impede the comprehensibility of those written works. The findings of this study will hopefully contribute to the raising of teachers' awareness of learners' errors and provide teachers with implications for teaching methods and error correction techniques which will enable the learners to develop their writing skills and progress in their language learning.

1.2 Purposes of the Study

This study aims to find out the types and frequency of global and local errors which occur in compositions written by first year Business Administration students at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus. Since studies on second language errors have shown that global errors hinder comprehensibility of written works (Tomiyana, 1980: Hendrickson, 1981: Kim, 1983), it would be beneficial to further find out the kinds of global errors that incomprehensible written works contain. This study then takes a further step to identify those compositions written by the students which are incomprehensible and investigate the types and frequency of global errors found in these incomprehensible written works. To be specific, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the types and frequency of global and local errors in students' written works?

2. What types and frequency of global errors are found in those written works identified as more incomprehensible?

1.3 Expected Results

It is expected that, as a result of this study, different types and frequency of global and local errors that students produce in their written works will be discovered. The researcher hopes that all information obtained in this study will provide language teachers with useful information on types and frequency of errors in students' written works. This will shed light on causes of errors and enable teachers to plan appropriate lessons or teaching techniques to decrease the number of students' errors which can lead to incomprehensibility and to help develop their writing skills.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

1. The researcher does not intend to conduct an analysis based on a general survey of the most common errors produced by the students. The study is limited to the types of global and local errors found in a writing task.

2. The analysis of types of global and local errors in students' written works in this study is mainly performed by the researcher. In case of difficulty or uncertainty in interpreting and analysing the data, two Thai teachers of English and one native speaker will be brought in.

1.5 Definition of Terms

In this study, five terms, namely error, global error, local error, written work, and incomprehensible written work are defined as follows. The definitions of the first three terms are based on Richards et al (1993: 127).

1. Error: the use of a linguistic item in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning. Errors can be divided into two types: global error and local error.

2. Global error: an error in the use of a major element of sentence structure, which makes a sentence difficult or impossible to understand.

3. Local error: an error in the use of an element of sentence structure, but which does not cause problems of comprehension.

4. Written work: a 150-word composition based on a series of pictures adapted from "Composition through Pictures" (Heaton, 1966).

5. Incomprehensible written work: a composition with a higher global error ratio than the cut-off point used as a basis for dividing the students' written works into two groups: 1) more incomprehensible, and 2) less incomprehensible. The focus of the study is on more incomprehensible written work.