

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the rationale for the study. It also includes the purposes of the study, expected results, scope and limitations of the study, and definitions of terms.

1.1 Rationale for the Study

In my experience of teaching English as a foreign language to first year students at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus, one consistent phenomenon I have observed is that many students still cannot master certain grammatical features. Students' grammatical mistakes are seen in both their written and spoken English, for instance: **I put pencil on table.* **Sirikarn likes a honest man.* **It has many cars on road.* **There have two houses and many children in the river.* **The river had many children.* **Every day has accident on the road.*¹ This observation is in agreement with the studies conducted by Ubol (1979), Sukamolsun (1980), Rujikiatgumjorn and Chiewkul (1987), Lukanavanich (1988), Torut (1997), Srichai (2002), and Lush (2002). They all found that the most frequent grammatical errors made by Thai university students were articles, tenses, prepositions, and subject-verb agreements.

In order to develop students' abilities to use grammar more effectively, grammar could be taught in more interesting and challenging ways. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) lessons can be a useful tool for students to practice the language, particularly when learning grammar. Many studies have shown that learning through CALL lessons can be as effective as learning with teachers, or workbooks, and may even be more effective if they are well designed and contain motivating features such as graphics, animations, colors, and sound (Nagata, 1993, 1996; Nutta, 1998;

¹ Sentences written by first year students taking Foundation English I at Prince of Songkla University.

Suppasetserree, 1998). However, one component of CALL lessons that has been overlooked is the explanations given in tutorials and in the feedback accompanying exercises.

Explanations are important in all kinds of teaching and teaching modes; lessons may not be understood without them. A large number of researchers have investigated teaching methodologies or technological innovations that can enhance learners' language ability, but very little is known about how explanations of materials help students understand and learn the lessons. The proliferation of computer technology makes it possible for learners to access CALL lessons and online grammatical CALL packages. Some of these are www.funbrain.com, www.edufind.com, and www.english-at-home.com. These web sites offer many stimulating ways of learning English grammar but one obvious feature that differs is the way explanations are provided, for example: www.funbrain.com and www.edufind.com use formal English to explain grammar rules and give feedback, while www.english-at-home.com uses less formal English.

In Thailand, most grammatical CALL packages explain grammar rules and give feedback in Thai. Some explain grammar rules and give feedback in English. To make students understand grammatical aspects, language used to explain grammar rules plays an important role. The language used in online grammatical CALL packages is English since it is presumably written for worldwide ESL students. In the Thai context, teaching grammar in English will be suitable for high proficiency students. Generally, it is recommended that Thai be used in an English classroom to teach grammar rules because grammatical aspects are difficult to understand even in Thai. Using English in these cases may take much longer to explain and students may still not fully understand what is being explained (Atkinson, 1987, 1993; Auerbach, 1993; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002).

The majority of grammatical CALL lessons written for a Thai audience give formal Thai explanations and very few use conversational ones. Although both styles of explanations are used in CALL packages, there has not been any empirical evidence showing which styles Thai students prefer or which one best helps them develop their grammatical knowledge. In an informal interview with twelve students, from the Faculty of Natural Resources, Prince of Songkla University, who studied a CALL lesson on "Noun Groups" using conversational Thai explanations, the students remarked that they liked the way the explanations were given both in the tutorial and the feedback. They felt

at ease because the tone of the explanations was like “friends talking to friends,” and so they were encouraged to use the package to develop their grammatical knowledge. However, this was the opinion of only a small selected group of students who used the CALL package containing a conversational explanation style. Other students may prefer a more formal style of explanation because they have been taught that way since they began their formal education. This in turn, makes them perceive that in a learning context, the tone of explanations should be in a formal style. We do not know for certain whether formal or conversational explanations in CALL packages have a positive influence on a student’s attitude and, if a more positive attitude results in better learning outcomes.

There has been a large amount of research reviewed by Chapelle (2001) investigating the effectiveness of CALL lessons, including, if CALL users can develop their learning autonomy with interactive activities; what kind of graphics can enhance a learner’s language learning abilities; and whether teachers and learners had positive experiences with technology through the use of tasks done in CALL lessons. However, there has not been any evidence to date about the effectiveness of the styles of explanations embedded in CALL lessons. Therefore, there is a need to ascertain whether the styles of explanations, formal or conversational Thai, in CALL tutorials and exercises can affect students’ attitudes and learning outcomes.

This study will focus on two problematic grammatical points i.e. the use of “Articles,” and the use of “There is/There are and Have/Has”. These two aspects were chosen because they are major problems for Thai university students. Articles are used in English but not in Thai. In English “There is/There are” are used to tell people that something exists while “Have/Has” are used to express possession. Both can be presented by one Thai word “mee” (have) and so this is confusing to Thai students. The CALL packages will be designed for self-study and the explanations for teaching the two grammatical aspects and for giving feedback will be in formal and conversational Thai.

1.2 Purposes of the Study

This study aims to investigate whether the styles of explanations in Thai used in tutorials and feedback in the grammatical CALL packages can affect students' attitudes, and whether an improved attitude manifests as a positive learning outcome. The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are students' attitudes towards formal and conversational Thai explanations used in the grammatical CALL packages?
2. To what extent do the explanation styles in the grammatical CALL packages affect students' learning outcomes?

1.3 Expected Results

It is expected that the students might have a more positive attitude towards the conversational Thai explanations and this attitude might lead to better learning outcomes with improved retention of up to two weeks.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

1. The study focuses on the effects of formal and conversational Thai explanations in the tutorials and exercises in the grammatical CALL packages.
2. There are only two grammatical aspects in the study: the use of "Articles" and the use of "There is/There are and Have/ Has".
3. The study does not compare the use of Thai explanations with English explanations.
4. The study does not compare the forms of explanations in CALL packages with classroom teaching.
5. Some intervening variables e.g. gender, age, language aptitude, learning styles are not taken into account.

1.5 Definitions of Terms

In this study, there are six terms defined as follows:

1. Formal explanation style: the written form of the explanation used in the grammatical CALL packages. The formal explanation style is usually found in textbooks, grammar books, etc. The sentences are usually complete and concise.

2. Conversational explanation style: the written form of the explanation used in the grammatical CALL packages. The conversational explanation style is usually used in a conversation with peers. It contains very informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language.

3. First experiment: the students in the first group studied “Articles” lesson with a formal explanation style, while those in the second group studied the same lesson with a conversational explanation style.

4. Second experiment: the students in the first group studied “There is/There are and Have/Has” lesson with a conversational explanation style, while those in the second group studied the same lesson with a formal explanation style.

5. First group: The students in the first group studied “Articles” lesson with a formal explanation style in the first experiment and studied “There is/There are and Have/Has” lesson with a conversational explanation style in the second experiment.

6. Second group: The students in the second group studied “Articles” lesson with a conversational explanation style in the first experiment and studied “There is/There are and Have/Has” lesson with a formal explanation style in the second experiment.