Criteria for Placing First Year Students in Required English Courses at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus

1. Background of the Study

The Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts (formerly Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Science), Prince of Songkla University (PSU hereinafter) has taken the responsibility of teaching required English courses for all students at the Hat Yai Campus since the establishment of the campus in 1967. Many changes have been made through time ranging from the reform of the syllabuses by the faculties needing the teaching service, resulting in a change in the number of credits and courses required, to the adaptation of course content and administration procedures by the department itself. The courses were all ESP at the beginning and students were put into groups according to their English proficiency measured by English Entrance Examination (EEE hereinafter) so each group of students was quite homogeneous. The content taught was different across the faculties so students studied English within their own discipline. However, as the campus grew larger, many more faculties were established and eventually more ESP courses were needed. The department then put all required English courses in six streams, namely English for Science, English for Health Science, English for Engineering, English for Natural Resources, English for Business Administration and English for Public Administration. What the department had eventually realized, nevertheless, was that students were not ready for ESP courses since they did not bring with them the technical knowledge needed to contribute to their classes. It seemed apparent that they needed more of general-academic English that would enable them to communicate in English and continue with their undergraduate study.

The department then decided to restructure required English courses into Foundation English I (FE I hereinafter) and Foundation English II (FE II hereinafter) as the minimum requirement of students in all faculties. They aimed to equip students with a knowledge of English and some study skills. For faculties which required their students to take more than two courses, they could choose as many courses as they needed from a range of courses offered by the department. This meant that all students had to do the same two Foundation English (FE hereinafter)

courses no matter what their levels of proficiency were. Hence, lower ability groups struggled hard to pass while those with higher ability were bored because the courses were too simple. The teaching and learning process became difficult to handle and, as a result, not as effective as it should have been.

With all the advances in science and technology resulting in globalization, it renders necessary that university graduates are capable of communicating with other people across countries and accessing the wealth of knowledge made more easily available. This, in turn, requires the mastering of a language or languages which will enable them to move along with the present world beyond frontier (Srisa-an, 1998) and make it easy for them to enter the workforce (Chivakidakarn et al, 1998). Srisa-an (1998) even suggested that they have at least two languages other than their native tongue.

The demand for a language that can be used in communication across countries was taken and translated into a university policy of ideal graduate production including the language ability required of the graduates which specifies English as "the" language. This is explainable since English is recognized and accepted as the world's language and also seen as a "vital driver of development and commerce both for individual personal fulfillment and international relations and business." (The British Council, 1995:4). However, the department felt that with the minimum requirement for the graduate's English proficiency, it should not mean that all students are required to study the same courses across the board and graduate with the same level of language ability. Students with higher proficiency should be allowed to further develop beyond the required level while those whose ability is not sufficient to start the university level course should have an opportunity to develop themselves to meet the demand. This means that students should be allowed to start with the English course that matches their entry level of ability. That is, if their ability is too low to start FE I, there should be a preparatory course that helps build a more solid ground for them to take before proceeding to FE I. If they are good, they should be allowed to bypass one or two of the FE courses and move on to a more advanced ones. It should be possible for graduates of the university to finish their study with various levels of English proficiency so long as the minimum required English proficiency is met.

With this ideology, many problems arose. What criteria could the department use to decide which course students should start off with? Is it necessary to give a placement test? Or, is it possible to use the EEE score to decide the level of students' ability? If the EEE score can demonstrate the level of students' ability, can it also show where they should start their English learning? What we need to know is which students with what level of ability should be put in the preparatory course, FE I, FE II, or other courses. Without this knowledge, it would be impossible to cater for this individual difference that will eventually lead to a better learning outcome and more effective development of our students in terms of their English proficiency.