

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



Background of the Study

In the current era of globalization, the world is so much of a global village that there are almost no boundaries regarding communication. English serves as a *lingua franca* in such communication, and is accordingly regarded as an international language (Crystal, 1997). The role of English is so dramatically important that the Ministry of Education has designated English as one of the compulsory subjects in the primary and secondary levels since 1996. Therefore, Thai students have to study English from grades one to twelve. Moreover, English is one of the main tests which grade 12 students undergo in the annual Nationwide Entrance Examination. Unfortunately, the average scores in English for such examination have been rather low. For instance, in the second annual Nationwide Entrance Examination for the academic year 2004, the average score in English was 37.92 percent. On a scale of 1 to 100, the lowest score was 3 and the highest score was 92, according to an article in the *Thairath* issue on November 24, 2004 (p. 15).

The low English ability of Thai students is caused by a variety of imperfect circumstances. Brown (2001) comments that there are always some imperfect circumstances present when teaching English, and one of these is large class size. In reality, especially at the secondary levels in Thailand, an English classroom consisting of approximately 40-60 students has been quite common, and very large classes of about a hundred students in a university have also been frequently observed (Boonyakarn, 1990). According to an article in the *Thairath* issue on January 12, 2004 (p.15), Kasama Vorravan na Ayudhaya, secretary-general of the Basic Education Commission, proposed that beginning the academic year 2004 and onwards, the number of students in a class must be limited according to educational level. She emphasized that in the early childhood levels, the maximum number must not exceed 35 per class; while in the primary and secondary levels, 45 is the recommended maximum. From the article, it seems that class size plays a salient role in pedagogy.

To ascertain whether class size was really a main problem and if it was significant enough to be worth studying, a background study regarding experience and perception of class size (See Appendix A) was conducted with teachers who teach English in state secondary schools in Bangkok.

The study was performed in the beginning of January 2004 using a questionnaire, which asked the participants to reveal their experience as well as perception about large English classes in Bangkok state secondary schools.

The Experience-Perception Questionnaire about Teaching Large English Classes was partially adapted from the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Project (Coleman, 1989) and was translated into Thai. This version was validated by three experts and was then revised before implementation. The questionnaire (Appendix B) was composed of eleven questions. Nine questions were open-ended questions asking respondents to state, among others, the exact number of students in the largest and smallest classes they were exposed to, which classes they normally taught, and the number of students in their usual class as well as the point at which they began to regard their classes as being "large". Furthermore, the questionnaire also asked respondents to state what they believed was the ideal class size and to indicate the point at which problems began due to classes becoming intolerably small or large. The others were two multiple-choice questions asking respondents to identify to what degree they thought small and large classes were problematic.

There are three education areas in Bangkok, according to the website of the Ministry of Education (http://www.moe.go.th/main2/data/New_zone46.htm). Four schools in each area were randomly selected. Ten questionnaires were personally handed to each school and the responses were personally collected a week later. All in all, 120 questionnaires were distributed. The data from the 98 (equivalent to 81.67%) returned and completed questionnaires were analyzed from the SPSS program to obtain the descriptive statistics.

Based on the data analysis, three main findings were obtained from the study. Among Thai teachers who taught English at state secondary schools, it was found that the average starting point at which they began to regard their classes as "large" was 42.57 students, whilst 44.52 was the average point at which they began to experience problems due to large classes; and 47.17 was the average class size they normally taught. Therefore, the usual classes that they normally taught were considered 'large'

and contained 'problems.' Second, from the viewpoint of the teachers, almost all of them (94.9%) agreed that teaching large English classes was a problem (87.8% stated it was a big problem and 7.1% said it was a small problem), while only 5.1% had no problems in teaching large English classes. Last but not least, based on their opinions, 94.9% shared a consensus that teaching small English classes was not a problem at all, while merely 5.1% had a small problem in teaching small English classes. In conclusion, Thai teachers who taught English at state secondary schools in Bangkok generally agreed that they experienced problems in teaching their usual English classes, which they themselves considered as large classes.

Statement of the Problem

In large classes, both teachers and students encounter a number of physical and psychological problems (Gedalof, 2002: 2). Gedalof explains further that it is not enough for teachers to just write bigger, talk louder, and make larger gestures; although sometimes, these actions can help. Moreover, Michaelsen (2004: 153) presents two typically problematic conditions of large classes: student anonymity and passivity that foster negative student attitudes and inhibit learning. He explains that in small classes, teachers generally know the majority of their students by name and students can interact with the teachers as well as with each other on a regular basis. As the classes become larger, individual students are lost in a sea of faces, and a smaller proportion of students are capable of engaging in discussion and interaction with both the teachers and each other. Therefore, different strategies and methodologies are definitely needed for implementation in these classes in order to keep them attentive enough to provide the input in EFL classes.

Egbert and others (1999: 4) propose eight conditions for optimal language learning environments. They claim that although other factors may come into play, these conditions are the most widely researched and supported with literature as well as make up a general model of optimal environment conditions for successful language learners. The eight conditions are as follows:

1. learners have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning;
2. learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience;
3. learners are involved in authentic tasks;

4. learners are exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative language;
5. learners have enough time and feedback;
6. learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process;
7. learners work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress /anxiety level; and
8. learner autonomy is supported.

It is quite obvious that most of these conditions can rarely occur in large ESL/EFL classes. For example, individual learners have no opportunities to be exposed to and interact in the target language in authentic tasks. As a consequence, it can be inevitably concluded that in Thailand, teaching English in secondary schools is currently problematic because of large class size which affects teaching methods.

Furthermore, in large English classes, teaching is primarily based on a traditional lecture format, which does not promote active independent learning (Macdonald, 2000). This lecture format is also the mode used by some English language teachers. In a semi-structured interview the researcher conducted for the background study, 36 teachers who teach English in a secondary level from 12 state secondary schools in Bangkok were randomly selected (three teachers from each school) and interviewed about the methodologies in teaching English. It turns out that 32 out of 36 teachers (88.88%) based their teaching on the exploit of the course book via lecturing only. Because of a large class size, the time constraint, and a pile of content, they could not design learning activities which involved students and where the teacher could teach integrated skills and content as it is in the real world. These are the distinctive reasons which the teachers claimed. Only four teachers (11.11%) spent a few minutes on a warm-up activity and tried to integrate other skills in the tasks. However, these four teachers still depended on lecturing and paper-based worksheets. From the survey, it seemed that these Thai teachers did not use a wide variety of language inputs, activities, and materials in their classes.

This kind of traditional teaching activity is considered passive learning, which consists primarily of presenting an organized summary of their comprehension of the subject (that is lecturing) and leading occasional whole-class discussions of the subject (sometimes euphemistically called Socratic dialogue); using questions intended to both intrigue the students and reveal new aspects of the subject (Fink, 2003: 103).

group learning. To illustrate, the teacher starts the class with a lecture to introduce the topic and elicit some ideas from the students. Afterwards, the students are exposed to the task individually. The individual work can help the students be ready for the next step: small group learning, in which the students are asked to work in small groups. Finally, when the teacher decides that the students have had some progress, they are assigned to work in large groups. Each member in a group has different assignments and duties, while the teacher acts as a facilitator and an adviser.

Obviously, the concept of the active learning processes is rooted in the Vygotskian constructivism, with the underlying belief that people can learn through social activity when they fully participate in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1996: 266). Since a large class size may prevent the interaction to occur, group dynamics (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003) and principles of communicative approach to teaching are used (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983).

In conclusion, from the background of the study and the statement of the problem, the researcher has attempted to propose a prospective Active Learning Instructional (ALI) Model to be an alternative for teachers who teach English in large classes at the secondary education level to enhance the students' English communicative abilities.

Objectives of the Study

This study contains three main research objectives as follows:

1. To develop the Active Learning Instructional (ALI) Model to be implemented in large classes to enhance secondary school students' English communicative abilities.

2. To evaluate the effectiveness of the ALI Model in a large authentic language classroom. The objectives of the experiment are described as follows:

- 2.1 To compare the students' posttest scores from the proficiency test between the experimental and control groups.

- 2.2 To compare the students' scores from the performance test between the experimental and control groups.

3. To study the secondary school students' opinions towards the ALI Model for enhancing their English communicative abilities in large classes.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Can the Active Learning Instructional Model (the ALI Model) enhance secondary school students' English communicative abilities in large classes?
2. To what extent does the ALI Model help the secondary school students improve their English communicative abilities in large classes?
3. What are the opinions of the secondary school students, who study in large classes, towards the ALI Model?

Statement of Hypotheses

Large classes are the reality for most English language teachers throughout the world, and especially in developing countries (Watson Todd, 2006). Thailand is a case in point. Allwright (1989) says that large classes indeed make classroom language teaching more difficult, or less effective. In large English classes, the teachers, inspired by the teaching used in other subjects in higher education, mainly base their teaching on a traditional lecture format which has been conducted with a large number of students (Macdonald, 2000; Darasawang and Srimavin, 2006). However, Fink (2003) believes that the lecture format induces passive learning; and that since interaction is believed to be important, such format may stifle success in English language learning (Darasawang and Srimavin, 2006). This is because a passive involvement generally leads to a limited retention of knowledge by students (Krivickas, 2005) and, moreover, does not promote optimal environment conditions for successful language learners (Egbert and others, 1999: 4). According to some research literature and anecdotal evidence, it has been overwhelmingly suggested that the use of active learning techniques may have a positive impact on students' learning (Johnson et al., 1991). Besides, students will learn more and will retain that learning longer if more active methods of teaching and learning are implemented (Ausubel, 1968; Ausubel et al., 1978; Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Meyers & Jones, 1993; Bean, 1996; Sutherland & Bonwell, 1996; Fink, 2003). Several studies have also shown that students prefer strategies that promote active learning rather than traditional lectures (Johnson et al., 1991).

To investigate the effects of the ALI Model for large classes, the students' English communicative abilities, and the students' opinions towards the ALI Model employed in large classes, the hypotheses are proposed as follows:

1. The English proficiency mean score of the students, who receive the treatment based on the ALI Model, is significantly higher than that of the students who are controlled to receive the conventional way of teaching. ($H_1: \mu_1 > \mu_2$)
2. The English performance mean score of the students, who receive the treatment based on the ALI Model, is significantly higher than that of the students who are controlled to receive the conventional way of teaching. ($H_2: \mu_3 > \mu_4$)
3. The students in the treatment group are likely to have positive opinions towards the ALI Model for enhancing secondary school students' English communicative abilities in large classes. (H_3 : Mean of opinion scale ≥ 3.5 from the 5-point scale on the questionnaire)

Scope of the Study

1. The population of this study included 240 Grade-10 students who were studying Foundation English 2 in semester two of academic year 2005 at a secondary school in Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand.

2. In this study, the independent variable is the ALI Model, while the dependent variables are the scores of the students' English communicative abilities from the proficiency test and the performance test and the students' opinions on the ALI Model instruction.

Definition of Terms

The terminologies employed in the research can be defined as follows:

1. **A Large English Class** is regarded as a classroom where English is taught and consists of more than 43 students. (Please refer to the class size problem in the background study.)

2. **Instructional Model** refers to a model of teaching that is a description of a learning environment. The descriptions have many uses, ranging from planning curriculums, courses, units, and lessons; to designing instructional materials: books and workbooks, multimedia programs, and computer-assisted learning programs.

Models of teaching or instructional models are one way to organize intelligence-oriented education, using the power education that gives the learners the means to educate themselves (Joyce & Weil, 2000: 1, 6-7, 13).

3. **Active Learning** is defined as engaging students in doing something besides listening to a lecture and taking notes to help them learn and apply course material (McKeachie, 1998). Instead of simply receiving information verbally and visually, students are provided opportunities to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concern of an academic subject. (Meyers and Jones, 1993: 6)

4. **The Active learning Instructional (ALI) Model** refers to the instructional model developed by synthesizing the ideas of active learning introduced by Stearns (1994) and Fink (2003). There are four main steps of the instructional model: lecture, individual learning, small-group learning and large-group learning. Each step is composed of three components: getting information and ideas, experiencing by doing, and observing and reflecting.

5. **The conventional way of teaching** refers to the PPP procedures, which stand for presentation, practice and production (Harmer, 2001: 80). In these procedures, the teacher introduces a situation which contextualizes the language to be taught. The language, too, is then presented. The students afterwards practice the language using accurate reproduction techniques, like choral repetition, and doing some exercises by themselves and/or with peers. Later, the students, using the new language, do tasks by themselves, in pairs, or in groups. This is referred to as production.

6. **English Communicative Abilities** refer to the knowledge of language form and the ability to put that knowledge to use in communication (Hedge, 2000: 407). The students' English communicative abilities, in this study, can be evaluated from the students' scores of the standardized proficiency test and the performance test.

7. **English Performance Test** is a measure of assessment based on authentic tasks such as activities, exercises, or problems that require students to show what they can do (McBrien & Brandt 1997: 77). It consists of any form of assessment in which the student constructs a response orally or in writing (Feuer & Fulton, 1993; Herman et al., 1992). In this study, the performance test serves as an alternative assessment used for finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction, and is an alternative to traditional forms of testing, such as multiple-choice tests (Stiggins, 1991). The performance test here is used to provide

more accurate measures of progress towards communication proficiency goals. It is criterion-referenced and is authentic because it is based on the individual and group-work activities that represent classroom and real-life settings (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996: 1-2).

8. **Proficiency Test** is a test designed to measure students' ability in a language regardless of any training they may have had in that language. The content of a proficiency test, thus, is not based on the content or objectives of language courses that people taking the test may have undergone. Rather, it is based on a specification of what candidates have to be able to do in the language in order to be regarded as proficient (Hughes, 2003: 11). Therefore, in the research, the Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP) test, which measures English language ability in two areas (understanding spoken and written English) and is designed for use with students entering grades seven through twelve or community colleges whose native language is one other than English, serves as the proficiency test employed as the pretest and posttest of the experimental and control groups for measuring students' English proficiency.

9. **Secondary School Students** refer to ninety-six Grade-10 students at a secondary school in Nakhon Pathom Province who studied Foundation English 2 in semester 2 of the academic year 2005.

Significance and Usefulness of the Study

Theoretically, the study proposes an instructional model for enhancing secondary school students' English communicative abilities in large classes based on the concept of active learning processes, which will be an alternative way to design courses for large classes rather than depending upon the conventional way of teaching.

Practically, the results of the study will shed light on how the concept of active learning processes can be developed for enhancing secondary school students' English communicative abilities in large classes. Moreover, the proposed ALI Model and lessons can be implemented as a ready-made guideline for teaching English communicative courses in large classes. Furthermore, the consequence of the study may inspire EFL teachers to use the ALI Model to develop courses for teaching various skills and levels of large EFL classes.

An Overview of the Study

The dissertation entitled “A Development of the Active Learning Instructional Model for Enhancing Secondary School Students’ English Communicative Abilities in Large Classes” consists of five main chapters.

The first chapter presents the background of the study, statement of problems, objectives of the study, research questions, statement of hypotheses, scope of the study, definition of terms, significance and usefulness of the study, and overview.

The second chapter reviews the underlying theories, principles, and concepts that are considered relevant and necessary for the development of the proposed ALI Model. Such literature review has topics which range from the large class concept, active learning, communicative language teaching, constructivism and group dynamics in the language classroom.

The third chapter presents research design and methodology. This includes the research design, research instruments, and research procedures; including the methods of data collection and data analysis.

The fourth chapter presents the results and findings from the study. Both qualitative and quantitative findings obtained from the proficiency test, performance test, interviews, questionnaires, students’ reflective journals, and teacher’s observation are demonstrated.

The last chapter summarizes the study, discusses the findings, and suggests implications and recommendations for further studies.