

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



1.1 Background of the Study

Thailand is a country of Buddhism, in which the majority of people are Buddhists. Therefore, Buddhist temples have long been the center of Thai lives. For religious propagation, Thai temples have been established in Western countries since 1966 (Seeha-umphai, 1996). The mission of Thai monks in these temples concerns not only Thai communities overseas, but also Western or local people in these areas. The monks abroad play significant roles as spiritual leaders and counselors for Thai people living outside the Kingdom. In general, these monks teach Buddhism to both Thais and foreigners, provide rituals, arrange meditation practices and retreats, accept consultation, give lectures on Thai culture and Buddhism in educational institutes, and the like.

The present study involves Thai missionary monks who are assigned to work temporarily in Thai temples in Western countries, including the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Russia, New Zealand, and especially the United States of America. In performing their religious missions effectively, English is very important since it is the major medium of communication. It is obvious that adequate English proficiency is necessary for these monks in order to help them communicate with the local people. In addition, not only general English, but specialized English is essential in fulfilling their functions. Therefore, before leaving Thailand, these monks need to be properly trained in relevant necessary skills to ensure they will perform well on their overseas missions.

Such a training program was once provided for Buddhist missionary monks, but it eventually ceased for various reasons. Later on, in 1995, because of an increasing need of missionary monks for specialized English, this kind of training resumed. With the cooperation of the Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the USA, Mahachulalongkorn-rajavidyalaya University has provided a training program for Buddhist missionary monks going overseas since 1995. The training session is usually conducted from March to May every year. About 70 monks are selected among

candidates from all over the country to be missionaries. The selected monks must have been in the monkhood for at least five years, have proper behavior and manners, have relatively good background knowledge of Buddhism, and be able to use survival English. The educational backgrounds of the majority of the monks selected are that of Bachelor's degree or its equivalent. However, the last requirement can be waived if the monks concerned have been meditation teachers and the temples abroad make a request for such monks. All of them participate in the training program in order to prepare themselves in terms of meditation teaching skills, Buddhist knowledge and propagation information, survival skills necessary for monks, and English proficiency for overseas missions.

The objectives of this program are to train and prepare qualified Buddhist missionary monks for Thai monasteries in foreign countries, as well as to support the missionary work of the Thai Sangha. The training is divided into three main sections. First, the Monastery Administration for Public Utility section, which lasts about 20 days, is aimed at providing the monks with basic skills in construction and maintenance. The second section is Meditation training, which enables the monks to practice meditation according to the Satipatthana Sutta, or the Foundation of Mindfulness (Phradhammapitaka, 1995). This section lasts about 30 days. Finally, the Academic section, which lasts about 30 days, consists of lectures, discussions, and seminars on 20 subjects, such as Principles and Methods in the Teaching of Buddhism, the Administration of a Monastery, National and International Law, Basic Computer, Dhamma Talks and Discussions in English, and so on. So far, the 642 monks who have graduated from this program are working in Thai temples around the world (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2005).

1.2 The Problem

An intensive English course has been one of the most important subjects in the Academic section. The present syllabus is primarily aimed at enabling monk students to use English in all the four skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing; as well as to master specialized vocabulary concerned with Buddhism and its propagation in real life communication. The Natural Approach is specified as the main teaching method in the existing curriculum (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2005). The class contains around 70 mixed level students. Most students have a Bachelor's degree with

some proficiency in English. However, some are beginners, while others have graduated with a major in English or have spent some time abroad. Therefore, the class materials have to be adjusted and geared towards the intermediate level. This presents problems for the weaker students, while more advanced students find the materials not challenging enough. In addition, the Natural Approach is not quite suited to the nature of the program. According to the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), students must be given enough comprehensible input for some time before they can produce the language. However, the time allotted to this program is insufficient to allow adequate comprehensible input. From discussions with the administrators of the program and the missionary monks who have already graduated from the program, it was learnt that most of the former students had had to enroll in ESL classes once they started their work abroad. It is thus evident that the English course provided in their training program in Thailand was not adequate. Lastly, this course has been offered for more than ten years; and although those teaching the course have revised their own lessons, no formal revision has ever been done. Moreover, the Natural Approach has now been overshadowed by other teaching methods. Given this, there is a need to revise the existing curriculum and find the best approach to teaching these monk students. This study is aimed at developing an official syllabus for the intensive English course for missionary monks to be assigned positions abroad.

1.3 Theoretical framework

First of all, research began in 2002 from class observation and personal interviews with the students, teachers, administrators, and missionary monks who graduated from the program. From then on, the interviews have been done in Thailand and in the United States of America. Based on discussions with former students who are now working in the United States and the United Kingdom, a real need of the missionary monks is the ability to communicate, especially through conversation, to fulfill certain tasks. Therefore, listening and speaking skills are essential and should be emphasized. Since the main focus of the training is to enable students to communicate and perform specific tasks and activities in real life, this study proposes the task-based approach. The reason for proposing this approach is that it focuses primarily on communicating meaning and authenticity (Skehan, 1996). Moreover, with the aim to prepare learners of varying ability to be able to work together in such

a limited period of time, the principle that language can be learned through working on tasks is certainly worth trying. There are several models of task-based learning (TBL) but in this study, Willis's framework (1996) was used as a main guideline. What Willis emphasized was that TBL combined the best insights from communicative language teaching with an organized focus on language form. She mentioned that the aim of the task was to create a real purpose for language use and provide a natural context for language study.

During the last two decades, the task-based approach has become popular and has been widely used in language teaching and research. Several research studies on the task-based approach provide evidence that it is significantly successful in teaching English both in EFL and ESL contexts. For example, Coleman (1987) found that the task-based approach in his 'Risking Fun' project was successful even for a large class of 110 students at Hasanudin University, Indonesia. Moreover, Prabhu (1987) used the task-based approach at four different schools in India. The results showed that the experimental groups that were taught by the task-based approach did significantly better on the test of listening/reading comprehension than the control groups that were taught by the structural approach (Prabhu, 1987). Also, Somerville-Ryan (1987) used the approach with slow students and it was successful in the LEAP Language Arts program in Singapore. The task-based approach has become popular in schools and language teaching institutes around the world. Research and studies on this approach have been conducted continually, e.g., Wright (1987) in Cameroon, Carless and Gordon (1997) in Hong Kong, Swain and Lapkin (2000) in the French immersion program, Duckett (2005) and Jeon & Hahn (2006) in South Korea. The Hong Kong government has even promoted task-based learning in their schools (Carless, 2004). Moreover, an International Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching was recently held in Belgium, in September 2005. In Thailand, Sumate (1996) developed an "activating English language skills" curriculum using the task-based approach for fifth and sixth grade students in private schools. Her curriculum consisted of all key elements of task-based instruction. The students were divided into two different groups: the experimental group using the task-based approach, and the control group using traditional methods. She found that the task-based group performed better than the control group using the traditional method. Similarly, Ratanawong (2005) studied sixth grade students in Ayuthaya province and also found that task-based instruction promoted her students' learning both cognitively and

affectively because the students enjoyed studying and developed their learning skills consecutively. At the Royal Thai Air Force Academy, Vadhanamra (1996) studied the effects that task-based activities had on the English language communicative ability of second year students. She found that students who were taught using task-based activities outperformed students who were taught using the activities suggested in the textbook, both in terms of integrated and individual language skills. Une-Aree (2002) developed an English course using the task-based learning approach for the School of Fine and Applied Arts at Bangkok University, and found that this approach increased motivation and created a sense of achievement in students. Pringphro (2002) investigated the strategies used by students in learning writing through task-based writing activities from ten lower secondary schools. He found that students gained more confidence and could develop learning strategies as well as self-editing strategies. Given the success of the task-based approach in a number of language programs, it is thus quite encouraging for this study to determine if the approach will work in an intensive English program for Buddhist missionary monks.

1.4 Research questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the language needs of Buddhist missionary monks?
2. Is task-based instruction (TBI) workable in an intensive English course for Buddhist missionary monks?
 - 2.1 To what extent does TBI increase learning outcomes?
 - 2.2 What are the views of the monk students on TBI?
3. How can TBI be made effective in the intensive English course for Buddhist missionary monks?

1.5 Objectives of the study

The purposes of this research are:

1. To investigate the English-language needs of Buddhist missionary monks;
2. To develop a syllabus and materials for an intensive English course for Buddhist missionary monks using task-based instruction;
3. To study the effect of task-based instruction on the learning outcomes of Buddhist

missionary monks;

4. To explore the missionary monks' views on TBI;
5. To propose how to implement an intensive English course for Buddhist missionary monks using TBI.

1.6 Statement of hypothesis

As TBI has been quite successful in other language programs (Phrabu, 1987; Somerville-Ryan, 1987; Vadhanamra, 1996; Carless and Gordon, 1997; Une-Aree, 2002; Ratanawong, 2005), it is hypothesized that TBI will increase the learning outcome of Buddhist missionary monks in this study.

1.7 Scope of the study

Seventy-seven monks took the intensive English course, which was part of the Training Program for Buddhist Missionary Monks going overseas. The training took place during April and May 2006 at Buddha Monthon, Nakorn Pathom. Of the 77 monks, 30 monks were systematically selected. The study focuses on this group of students, with the intention of such group providing quantitative results based on pre-test and post-test scores. Twenty monks were then randomly selected to represent the high and low proficiency groups based on their pre-test scores, which included speaking and listening components. This group would provide in-depth information about the views of students from different levels based on their logs and interviews.

1.8 Definition of terms

The key terms used in the study are defined as follows:

1.8.1 Buddhist missionary monks

“Buddhist missionary monks” refers to Thai Buddhist monks who are going to stay (or who have stayed) in Thai monasteries abroad to impart the Buddha’s teachings to Thai people and foreigners there, and whose assignments are approved by the Sangha Supreme Council.

1.8.2 Intensive English course

“Intensive English course” refers to the 42-hour-English course provided by the Buddhist missionary monk training project to the selected monks who enroll in such training to prepare them for their overseas missions. Usually, the time allotted for each course is limited. The content of the course consists of topics and issues concerning missionary monk’s work and their daily life.

1.8.3 Tasks

“Tasks” refers to activities in the class arranged by the teacher to prepare the students so that they are able to manage certain endeavors that they are supposed to accomplish when assuming the missionary monk profession. While students are working on these activities, they are supposed to use English for communicative purposes in order to achieve an outcome. (Willis, 1996) In this research, the activities concerning what a monk needs to do as a missionary abroad, include applying for a visa, boarding the plane, getting around by using map, visiting a doctor, talking about monk’s role, talking about Thai culture, and explaining Dhamma.

1.8.4 Task-based instruction (TBI)

“Task-based instruction” or “TBI” refers to the method of teaching whereby the teacher prepares activities that allow students to accomplish the target tasks derived from the needs analyses previously conducted. Based on Willis’s approach (1996), each lesson consists of: (1) the pre-task stage where the teacher introduces the task and suggests the procedural operation; (2) the task cycle stage where students work either individually, in pairs, or in groups in order to accomplish the task and present their outcome; and (3) the language focus stage where students analyze the specific patterns of language use and practice certain vocabulary items, phrases, or language structures presented by the teacher.

1.8.5 High/ low ability group

“The high ability group” refers to the monk students who scored above the mean scores in the pre-test. Those who scored lower than the mean scores were considered to be part of the low ability group. There are ten students in each group and all of them are the key informants who provide the qualitative data. Their profiles are similar: the age range is 27 – 48 years old, the lent period is 5 – 21 years, the education background range from Diploma to Master’s degree, and their English proficiency is varied: pre-intermediate to intermediate; very few are considered advanced.

1.8.6 Learning outcomes

“Learning outcomes” refer to the ability to perform real tasks in realistic situations. Learning outcomes in this study will be measured by the gain scores of the participants and in-depth information about their attitudes towards the course.

1.9 Significance of the study

This study will be beneficial to the Buddhist Missionary monk Training Program and the missionary monks who are going abroad. Even monk students who have participated in the program but are not assigned to an overseas mission can apply their improved skills with foreigners who come to visit their temples. As this is the first research conducted on English for the missionary monk profession, it contributes to the ESP area as a pioneer research with this specific group of students. It also serves as an additional study to enrich the area of research concerning the use of task-based instruction for adult mixed level students in English language teaching in Thailand.

1.10 Outline of the dissertation

Chapter 1 describes the background of the study concerning the intensive English course for Buddhist missionary monks which is part of the training program

for Buddhist monks going overseas. The problems are identified and the reasons for selecting task-based instruction (TBI) for implementation in this study are discussed.

Chapter 2 reviews the syllabus design, together with other factors that influence the course, such as target situation analysis, needs analysis, and students' learning styles. The task-based approach is then discussed in detail in the various aspects involved, such as the methodology, materials, lesson planning, and evaluation. Finally, previous research on TBI in an international context and in Thailand is reviewed.

Chapter 3 deals with the research methodology of the study, which includes the research design, research materials and instruments, and the methods of data collection. The pilot study is also presented with proposed changes for the main study.

In Chapter 4, data analyses and the findings are presented, focusing on the three main answers to the research questions as well as discussions on the findings of the study. How to implement TBL effectively in the monk-training course is then recommended.

Chapter 5 comprises a summary of the study, implications for teaching English to monk students and task-based instruction, and recommendations for further research.