

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale and Statement of the Problem

English has been considered an important language in Thailand since 1824. At the time it was popular only among elites (Hantrakoon, 2001d). Later in 1921 English became more popular in a wider range and was listed as a compulsory subject in Thai schools (Aksornkul, 1980). The English language has been widely taught from kindergarten through university levels. At present, English is not only a popular foreign language or second language subject, it has been used as a medium of instruction, not only in Thailand but worldwide (Hantrakoon, 2001f). As the number of regional and international organizations in Thailand grows, the greater is the demand for English use. As witnessed by the use of English as the medium of communication of these organizations such as ASEAN University Network (AUN), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), nowadays English has been accepted as the language for international communication in Thailand (Wongsothorn, 1999). Wongsothorn, W., Hiranburana, K., Chinnawongs, S. (2003) note that

English has reached importance as an international language in an era of rapid world development. English is seen as an essential tool, either for economic and technological development or for maintaining a perceived or actual superiority in the economic and technological marketplace. Governmental policy initiatives are reinforced at a personal level by parents who perceive that competence in English will give their children a comparative advantage when it comes to further education and employment (Nunan, 1999; Hantrakoon, 2001c). This also accords to Ketudat's statement that the era of globalization has arrived with many implications for national stability. Only countries endowed with vision and wisdom to understand the globalization process and its oncoming threats and opportunities will be able to secure a peaceful and productive co-existence in the international community (Ketudat, 1996).

The Thai government responded to these threats by developing the current system of education, especially in the foreign language area. For example, on December 19, 1995, the Cabinet approved the language education policy proposed by the Ministry of Education stipulating that English is a compulsory subject starting from grade 1 onwards using the curriculum, syllabus and guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education in order to fulfill the social and national demand for language education. The policy also gives the status of English as the first foreign language starting in primary schools (Ministry of Education, 1996). The Ministry of University Affairs has also announced recently that the goals of language education in higher education (1996-2005) are to provide undergraduate students with the capacity

of communicating in English (Ministry of University Affairs, 1997). In addition, the Eighth National Education Development Plan: 1997-2005 (p. 40) comments that more time should be provided in the curriculum for language learning, especially the English language (Ministry of University Affairs, 1997).

In response to the elevation of English in the Thai education system, there have also been attempts to replace rote memorization and the grammar translation method that has long been adopted in with the aural-oral method. However, it did not turn out to be very successful (Wongsothorn et al., 2003). Consequently many parents who want their children to acquire English had to spend a lot of money sending them abroad. It was not until 1991 that Thai students were allowed to study in international education in Thailand using English as the medium of instruction (Hantrakoon, 2001d). Since then bilingual education and international programs for Thai school children have become very popular (Wongsothorn et al, 2003). They had been so popular that they increased from 5 to 56 programs within 10 years in 2001 (Hantrakoon, 2001a). Parents who felt that English was not adequately taught during those many years at schools kept sending their children to international education. This accounted for the recent mushrooming of private international schools in Thailand (International education, 2003). Consequently, to provide further education for these students from international programs for Thai school children, both Thai public and private universities offer altogether 387 international programs using English as the medium of instruction both at undergraduate and graduate levels, i.e. 128 undergraduate programs in 70

areas of study in 26 universities; 190 master's degree programs in 112 areas of study in 26 universities; and 69 doctoral degree programs in 32 areas of study in 12 universities. Foreign and Thai students can take courses for credits from such programs (Ministry of Universities Affairs, 2003). The increasing numbers of international programs for Thai school children as well as for higher education reflects the popularity and importance of English as the medium of instruction (International program, 2003).

My personal motivation in choosing this topic arose from my own experience. I taught English in a non-immersion program for about 10 years and found that very few Thai students succeeded in their language learning, especially speaking skills by using the traditional teaching method. According to research done by the Ministry of Education, it was shown that among high school subjects, English had the worst average score. The average English score of the ninth grade students was 19.5 while the twelfth grade's was 22.9 out of 50 (Weak points, 2002). Another research done by Chulalongkorn Academic Testing Center discovered that among nine Asian countries, Thai graduates' English competence was ranked the eighth. It found that the average TOEFL score of Thai graduates was only 498, which was 2 points higher than the lowest among Asian countries which took the test (Thai graduates, 2002).

Last year I moved to another school to teach in an immersion program using English as a medium of instruction. I found that there are more and more Thai students moving from non-immersion programs to the immersion program even though the school fee is very high, at least 10 times more

expensive than private non-immersion schools. This is, according to the parents, because they are disappointed by traditional teaching methods in Thai education especially in the English language area and they expect that the English immersion program should be able to better help their children acquire the English language. This accords with what Hantrakoon (2001d) reported that more and more Thai parents kept sending their children to international programs mainly because parents had been disappointed by traditional English teaching method in Thai education .

Therefore, before deciding to send their children to the immersion program, it would be wise for parents to gain knowledge about immersion programs in order to evaluate if the program could really meet their expectations or is suitable for their children (Hantrakoon, 2001b). Though there is research done worldwide claiming the effectiveness of foreign language immersion programs, there is little such research done in Thailand.

All this information, including my own experience in the immersion program made it interesting to conduct research in order to find out if in the opinions of the students and their parents, the potential of immersion programming for effective language learning is being fulfilled in the school under study by asking the following questions: to what extent has this immersion program satisfied non-native English speaking students and their parents concerning English language acquisition; taken as a whole, has joining in the immersion program been seen worthwhile in terms of high expenses, cultural effects, and so on; and how might this immersion program be revised to better meet students' and parents' expectations.

Aim of the Research

The purpose of this study is to identify and gain understanding of the attitudes of non-native English speaking students and their parents towards an English immersion program, especially the dimension of English language acquisition.

Objectives of the Research

The objective of this research is to answer the following questions:

1. According to the actual experience of non-native English speaking students and parents, to what extent has this immersion program been seen as successful, focusing on the English language acquisition?
2. Taken as a whole, has joining in the immersion program been seen worthwhile in terms of high expenses, cultural effects, and so on.
3. Based on these results, how might this immersion program be revised to better meet students' and parents' expectations.

Scope of the Study

This research will be carried out in one English immersion program in Chiangmai, Thailand to ascertain grades 4 to 12 non-native English speaking students and their parents' attitudes and understanding of the immersion program regarding the English language acquisition.

Definition of Terms

1. Terms within the topic: Attitudes of non-native English speaking students and their parents towards an English immersion program in Chiangmai, Thailand focusing on English language acquisition

Attitude	A perceived or instructed judgment, opinion, and feeling
Non-native English speaking students	Students whose native language is not English. In this study most of these students are Thai. Some are Korean and a very few are other nationalities.
Parents	Parents of the non-native English speaking students studying in this particular immersion program. Most of them are Thai. Some are Korean. Very few are other nationalities.
English immersion program	A particular immersion program, set in a leading private school in Northern Thailand located in the city of Chiangmai. It was established in 1993 to meet a specific need for high quality international education. It combines the Asian values of a caring family and a Western style of

instruction to all grade levels. The school has invested a lot of administration time, money and personnel in helping non-native English speaking students to acquire the English language to meet their expectation of enrolling in the school.

It offers classes from preschool to grade 12 using English as the language of instruction. The students to teacher ratio is not greater than 20:1.

This immersion program is fully accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) from preschool through grade 12 and fully licensed by the Ministry of Education of Thailand.

The teachers are from various countries, for example, United States, Canada, England, Australia, Scotland, India, Thailand, etc. The students are also from various countries, for example, United States, England, Switzerland, Philippines, Japan, Korea, China, Thailand, etc.

English language acquisition Natural acquiring of the English language for practical use in daily situations

2. Terms in the study

Immersion program

A program, in which school pupils are taught all subjects through the medium of a language which is not their native one except for their native language subject. In this research, international schools in Thailand, of which the objective of the program is to provide opportunity for Thai students to acquire English implicitly through studying all subjects in English, are regarded as schools of English immersion programs on the basis that they use English (L2) as a medium of instruction in the context of Thai language (L1) which is parallel to the context of all research in the related studies.

Non-immersion program

A program, in which school pupils are taught all subjects including foreign language subjects through the medium of their native language

Bilingual education	A program in which students are taught using two languages
International program	A program in which students are taught all subjects using English as a medium of instruction
EFL program	A program in which non-native English speaking students study general subjects such as math, science, etc. using English according to their levels as a medium of instruction.
Thai	A person who has Thai nationality and speaks Thai.
Mixed Thai	A person whose either father or mother is Thai and speaks Thai as a native language.
Other non-native English	A person who is neither Thai nor Western and does not speak English as a native language.

3. Abbreviation

IP	Immersion program
L1	First language or native language

L2	Second language or language which is not fluently spoken
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a second language
EFL	English as a foreign language
IQ	Intelligence quotient
K-12	Kindergarten – Grade 12

Significance of the Study

This research is an attempt to investigate the attitudes of non-native English speaking students and their parents towards an English immersion program in Chiangmai, Thailand, especially attitudes regarding English language acquisition, with the expectation that the insights developed would be useful in helping:

1. students to realize where they are and how to improve themselves in the area of English language acquisition.
2. parents to realize how far they have come towards fulfillment of their expectations for their children in the area of English language

acquisition and in what direction they should better direct their efforts to help their children better acquire the English language.

3. teachers to become more aware of the attitudes of non-native English speaking students and their parents, in order to improve their teaching strategies and understanding of parents' expectations and students' hopes for outcomes.
4. administrators to have a better grasp of the attitudes of non-native English speaking students and their parents in order to improve administration and to better support the teachers in helping the students to acquire the English language according to their expectations.
5. others in the community to have increased understanding of immersion programs in the area of English language acquisition, for better decision-making regarding their children's education, especially in the English language area.