

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Rationale and statement of the problem

Speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills because speaking is a basic means of human communication (Bailey & Savage, 1994: vii). And since English is regarded as a lingua franca, it has become the language that almost all of the second or foreign language learners would want to study. People use English for communication in their daily lives, careers, education, or even for pleasure. That is the reason why most English learners want to be able to speak English as proficiently as they can.

This perception has been supported by one of the findings from the needs assessment for an EFL program in Japan (Orikasa, 1989). It indicated that speaking was conceived of as being the most important skill by the students, followed by listening, reading, writing, and translation. In addition, the prominent finding from many surveys conducted with various educational institutions and private vocational sectors in Thailand (Wongsothorn et al., 2002; Silapa-Anun, 1991; Nilrath, 1991; Sonsa-Ard, 1980; Sukomolson et al., 1980) confirmed that the ability to speak English was recognized as more important compared to the other skills.

Speaking a second or foreign language such as English can become a very difficult task for English language learners because speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing as well as receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994: 257-258; Florez, 1999: 1). It is the productive or oral skill which consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning. According to Florez (1999:1-2), a good speaker must be able to produce the sounds, stress patterns, rhythmic structures, and intonations of the language; use accurate grammar structures; select understandable and appropriate vocabulary; assess the characteristics of the target audience; apply strategies to enhance comprehensibility; use gestures or body language; give attention to the success of the interaction; and try to maximize listener's comprehension and involvement.

Generally, to be good at speaking even in the first language involves language competence, strategic competence, and psycho physiological mechanisms

(Luoma, 2004: 97). According to Macaro (2003:191), speaking has a dual function. The first function is to communicate information, and the second is to be a tool to think and to organize information. Therefore, it is a formidable task for language learners to possess good oral skill for their second or foreign language.

In a survey of EFL teachers in their classrooms, Nunan (1993, cited in Lazaraton, 2001: 110) found several challenges existed in those EFL classrooms such as the lack of motivation and opportunities to speak because of large class size, or the cultural issue of speaking only being allowed when called on, and, finally, the lack of competence or confidence in speaking English, particularly, if the teacher was a non-native speaker of English.

Though the problems of learning and teaching English in Thailand have been given substantial attention, a number of studies (Sumate, 1996: 3; Chotikapanich, 2001: 49; Thakhong, 2003; Huangnak, 2004: A7) reported that the quality of learning and teaching English, especially speaking skill was low and did not meet the standards set by the Ministry of Education of Thailand. Thai students, excluding those studying in International or Bilingual schools, still lack necessary English communicative skills due to limited opportunities to practice. On the other hand, Thai teachers may lack experience in using the Communicative Approach, or they may not be confident enough to communicate in English with the students in their language classrooms.

Specifically, the problems of English education in Thailand can be separated into two dimensions: learning and teaching dimensions. For the learning dimension, Thai students generally do not have much exposure to using or communicating in English due to the large class size, natural Thai characteristics of being shy or unassertive, and small number of class hours for English learning and practicing. For the teaching of EFL dimension, most of the Thai English language teachers may not be proficient in the English oral or communicative competence, so they use Thai in their English classrooms because of their lack of confidence in English pronunciation. Most of the time the teaching of English speaking skills has been twisted to be more of the drilling and mimicry. To repeat things over and over while teaching and giving feedback seems to be common for the teachers because they perceive that it ensures that the students will understand and learn. Unfortunately, this perception does not help the learners be successful in their English learning. The underpinning reason

may be because of the emphasis on the teacher-fronted classroom rather than on the social interaction and co-construction of learning among the students.

Considering the important role of Thai English language teachers, this study focuses on the improvement of English speaking skills of Thai teacher-to-be students who will become English language teachers after their graduation. This group of students may be the right choice to start with for the problem of learning and teaching of English speaking skills in Thailand.

As to the English learning and teaching processes, it has been recommended that carefully planned tasks or activities should be used as the pedagogical intervention to expose and motivate Thai students to the use of the target language (Prapphal, 2003: 7). In the present study, a task is defined as a classroom activity or exercise that has an objective obtainable only through interaction among participants, a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and a focus on meaning exchange (Lee, 2000, cited in Ellis, 2003: 5). The idea of using a Task-based Language Teaching Approach (TBLT) is based on the belief that language learning depends on immersing learners not only in the "comprehensible input", but also in tasks that require them to negotiate meaning as well as to be engaged in meaningful communication which occurs in social interaction as described by the Socio-Cultural theory (SCT) or Social Constructivism perspective. Therefore, the teaching of speaking skill as a contextualized socio-cultural activity has become the focal point of many ESL classrooms (Lazaraton, 2001:103). Nunn (2001), Ellis (2000), and Foley (1991) have put forth the idea that Vygotskian hypothesis of regulation could explain the underpinning principles of the task-based approach since second language learning is regarded as an internal, self-regulated process which will vary individually, and must be part of a social interaction between the self and more experienced members of the community which is similar to a child's development. Therefore, knowledge is not simply constructed, but it must be co-constructed with others with higher capabilities. Psycholinguistically, the role of TBLT approach and SCT "need not be seen as incompatible" (Nunn, 2001: 6; Ellis, 2000: 215), but as a complementary explanation of how second/foreign language learners engage their communicative competence while handling the tasks.

The Social Constructivism sees both learning and language learning as dialogically based. The underlying principles of SCT can be categorized under the perspectives of learning, learners, and teachers respectively. From the learning perspective, it is considered a social process. Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. Collaborative learning methods are required to enable learners to develop teamwork, and to see individual learning as essentially related to the success of the group learning. Learners are active rather than passive agency. They create or negotiate meanings with other learners through interaction. Finally, teachers become facilitators who mediate and structure the process of collaboration and scaffold learners within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), ZPD is a metaphor created to explain the difference between an individual's actual and potential levels of development. From the above mentioned perspectives, it is assumed that second language/or foreign language acquisition is not a purely individual-based process. Instead, it is a shared process between individuals.

In order to create a shared knowledge among the Thai learners to motivate their English production, the narrative task has been selected for this study because narratives cannot only create a sense of shared knowledge, but also interests that link people together. As Revell and Norman (1999:83) have said, "narratives or stories are such wonderful vehicles for language in a meaningful context... Because they are highly motivating, engage the emotions and they seem to satisfy some deep psychological need for narrative". Stories are a familiar and reassuring way of acquiring language (Wajnryb, 2003: 5-8; McCarthy & O'Keffee, 2005:35). Zaro and Salaberri (2004:3) also agreed that a narrative or story-telling activity can stimulate EFL learners' interest in communicating in a meaningful way which in turn helps them internalize the language. However, its content will be concerned not only with "telling someone else that something happened", but also "giving opinions about that thing" in order to enhance and contextualize a practice of the target language. In addition, the narrative task methodology employed in this study will emphasize the narrative task repetition which is referred to as the re-performance of the same task type on a later occasion.

Task repetition, which used to imply the old concepts of "boredom", "disinterest", or "demotivation", has recently been given attention in task-based research since the focus of language teaching and learning has been on the concept of

the learner's attention and the extent to which it is a necessary condition for learning (Gass et al., 1999: 551). A number of empirical studies indicated that when learners repeated a task, their production improved in many ways, that is, their sentence structures were more elaborate, they became more fluent and/or expressed themselves more clearly (Gass & Varonis, 1985; Yule, Powers & McDonald, 1992; Gass et al., 1999; Bygate, 2001a; Lynch & Maclean, 2001). Based on the studies of long-term memory, the repetition of a similar language task could help learners relate their new performances to the information kept in their long-term storage (Tileston, 2004: 12; Bygate, 2001a: 28). On the contrary, Plough and Gass (1993, cited in Gass et al., 1999:572) mentioned that students could easily become somewhat disinterested in the tasks given to them if they had been carried out repeatedly. However, Ellis (2001:97-98) stated that several researchers found that asking learners to repeat a task had a marked interactive effect, and that more research was needed to investigate the effect of task repetition on interaction.

A preliminary study conducted by the researcher with ten first-year students of Rajaphat Rajanakrin University also showed that there were positive results in terms of their English language performances. Their individual oral performance contained less pauses, and they used more content words in their repeated narratives. Another interesting finding from interviewing some of the students related to the task repetition was that the same task type with the same topic should be repeated only once in order to avoid boredom.

Narrative tasks and their repetition can be regarded as a solution for the need for meaningful activity and mediational tool to encourage learners to speak a target language. It merits investigating how narrative tasks and narrative task repetitions can foster interlanguage development of Thai students. Regarding the consideration of language as another mediating tool for learning, Donato (1994, cited in Swain & Lapkin, 1998: 321) suggested that the focus in second language acquisition should be on observing the construction of co-knowledge and how this co-construction process resulted in linguistic change among and within individuals during joint activity. Swain & Lapkin (1998: 321) further supported that learning occurred in performance, and Macaro (2003: 191) also agreed that there was more to communication than simply getting the message across. Accordingly, it is interesting to explore the co-construction process to see how the learners help each other to co-construct their English language learning, and what they learn from that process when they are

collaboratively working together and interacting with each other in order to accomplish the task.

### **1.2. Research questions**

Studies on task repetition indicated that when learners had been asked to repeat a task, there was a marked interactive effect and improvement of their communicative efficiency. Moreover, there were also effects on various aspects of the language production of the learners. Therefore, the research questions in this study have been set to be:

1. Would the English oral posttest scores of the subjects be significantly higher than those of the pretest after the subjects had been practicing on the narrative task repetition?
2. Would there be a significant difference in the fluency of the subject's English oral language performances between new narrative task and narrative task repetition?
3. Would there be a significant difference in the accuracy of the subject's English oral language performances between new narrative task and narrative task repetition?
4. Would there be a significant difference in the complexity of the subject's English oral language performances between new narrative task and narrative task repetition?
5. What are the descriptive qualities of English oral language performances of the subjects performing new narrative task and narrative task repetition?
6. How do the subjects in the focus group co-construct their English language knowledge when they are planning their new narrative tasks and narrative task repetitions?
7. What do the subjects in the focus group learn from the co-construction process while they are planning the narrative tasks and narrative task repetitions?

### **1.3. Objectives of the study**

Though there has been a considerable number of task-based repetition research that explores production as well as interaction research that explores learning, there has been little research that combines both dimensions in order to

investigate the production and learning of Thai Undergraduate students in the authentic classrooms. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the effects of narrative task repetition on the English oral language performance of Thai Undergraduate students.
2. To compare the English oral language performances of new narrative task and narrative task repetition of Thai Undergraduate students using both quantitative and qualitative measures.
3. To investigate the process of co-construction of Thai Undergraduate students while they are planning for their narrative tasks.
4. To find out the outcome of their process of co-construction.

#### **1.4. Statements of hypotheses:**

As previously mentioned, the findings of the empirical studies on task repetition (Gass & Varonis, 1985; Gass et al., 1999; Skehan, 1998; Bygate, 2001a; Lynch & Maclean, 2001) showed that their production had been improved in a number of ways. Hence the hypotheses set forth in this study are as follows:

1. The mean of the posttest score of the subjects is higher than that of the pretest after the subjects had been practicing on the narrative task repetition.
2. Narrative task repetition yields greater degree of fluency in English oral language performance than that of new narrative task.
3. Narrative task repetition yields greater degree of accuracy in English oral language performance than that of new narrative task.
4. Narrative task repetition yields greater degree of complexity in English oral language performance than that of new narrative task.

#### **1.5. Scope of the study**

Before conducting the study, the scope has been planned to cover the following:

1. The population of this study is the third-year undergraduate students majoring in English. They are studying in the Faculty of Education. They are trained to be teachers of English language after graduation. The samples of the study which later will be referred to as "participants" are twenty third-year English major students in

the Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University. They are enrolled in a course called Effective English Speaking. This study was conducted in the first semester of academic year 2006.

2. The task used in this study is the narrative task and its repetition. To be more precise according to the research terms, the independent variable in this study is the narrative task repetition.

3. The effects of the narrative task repetition or the dependent variables are the English oral language performance of the participants. The productions of the participants are quantitatively measured on three areas which are fluency, accuracy, and (lexical) complexity. Moreover, they are also measured by using the descriptive band scales in the areas of "fluency", "accuracy", "(syntactic) complexity", "pronunciation", "vocabulary", "thematic development", and "coherence and cohesion" respectively.

#### **1.6. Limitations of the study**

This study is based on a limited number of participants because of two main reasons. The first reason is the use of a qualitative research methodology which needs to focus on a small number of participants. The second reason is the theoretical theory of this study which is Social Constructivism that prioritizes qualitative research methodology (Foster & Ohta, 2005:2). This limitation may undermine the representativeness of the samples and the generalizability of the findings.

#### **1.7. Definitions of terms**

1. *Task* refers to a classroom activity that emphasizes interaction and collaboration among the learners with a focus on the exchange of meaning. In this study, a specific type of task which is narrative task and task repetition will be investigated.

2. *Narrative task* is a story-telling activity. In the present study, it is a speaking activity in which the participants have been given time to plan before telling stories with sequences of event descriptions as well as the expression of their opinions in order to promote both their English oral skills and cognitive processes such as classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information towards picture(s), realia, or other stimulus material(s) which were based on a particular topic or thematic content.



3. *Task repetition* means a re-performance of a speaking activity in which the participants have been given time to plan before telling stories with sequences of event descriptions as well as the expression of their opinions in order to promote both of their English oral skills and cognitive processes such as classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information towards the same set of picture(s), realia, or other stimulus material(s) and the same topic or thematic content.
4. *Oral language performance* refers to a speaking ability that the participants exhibited during the performance of their narrative tasks which will be measured by using the T-unit to account for fluency, accuracy, and lexical complexity of the oral production and descriptive band scales developed by the researcher. (See Appendix 7)
5. *Thai undergraduate students* means the third-year English major students at the Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University.
6. *Fluency* refers to a speed and general smoothness while performing the narrative task. It is measured by the T-unit by considering the marked pauses that are longer than one second. (See Appendix 15) Additionally, it is also measured by the descriptive five-band scales developed by the researcher for assessing the narrative test of the Oral Proficiency Test used in this study. (See Appendix 7)
7. *Accuracy* refers to the extent to which the language produced in performing a task conforms to target language norms (Ellis, 2003: 339). In this study, it is the grammatically correct use of articles, tenses, subject-verb agreement, phrasal verbs, and prepositions when measuring by using the T-unit (See Appendix 15), and the descriptive five-band scales developed by the researcher for assessing the narrative test of the Oral Proficiency Test used in this study. (See Appendix 7)
8. *Complexity* covers both the *lexical complexity* and *syntactic complexity*. *Lexical complexity* means the number of grammatically correct words being used in the narrative task which was measured by the T-unit (See Appendix 15). The *syntactic complexity* is a variety of sentence structures being used in the narrative task which is measured by the descriptive five-band scales developed by the researcher for assessing the narrative test of the Oral Proficiency Test used in this study. (See Appendix 7)
9. *Qualities of oral language performance* mean the descriptions of narrative performance using the descriptive band scales developed for assessing the narrative test of the Oral Proficiency Test. The descriptions of the narrative performances are

based on the areas of fluency, accuracy, complexity, pronunciation, vocabulary, thematic development, and coherence and cohesion.

10. *Thematic development* is a clear description of the story and its details with an appropriate conclusion. It is measured by the descriptive band scales developed by the researcher for assessing the narrative test used in this study. (See Appendix 7)

11. *Coherence and cohesion* refer to the use of organizational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices. It is measured by the descriptive band scales developed by the researcher for assessing the narrative test used in this study. (See Appendix 7)

12. *Co-construction of knowledge* is a learning process where new knowledge (e.g., a solution to a problem, a text, or a collective opinion) was jointly constructed by the participants during the fifteen-minute planning time in order to accomplish the narrative task.

13. *T-unit* refers to a single clause, or an independent clause with one or more dependent clause(s) attached to it.

### **1.8. Significance of the study**

This study provides evidence of the effects of narrative task repetition on the English oral language performance of Thai Undergraduate students as follows:

1. Theoretically, the study is among the recent research which investigates the English production of Thai undergraduate students combining with the learning process from social interaction in an authentic classroom. The study provides insightful information and contributes additional knowledge concerning the Task-based language learning and teaching and Social Constructivism in the Thai context which implies further research in other skills of English language.
2. Pedagogically, the present study covers the framework of Task-based language learning and teaching and provides the important aspects of lesson plans of the narrative tasks and narrative task repetitions which are useful for any Thai English language teachers to be used as the pedagogical intervention.
3. Practically, this research presents a method for improving the English oral performance of Thai undergraduate students. This will help our Thai students to be more proficient in English, and thus help our country to become more competitive in a world of globalization where English is used as one of the languages of communication.

### **1.9. Outline of the study**

There are five chapters in this dissertation.

Chapter one describes the rationale and the statement of the problem of English oral skills learning and teaching in EFL and Thai contexts. As a result, the narrative task and its repetition integrated with the Social Constructivism theory of learning have been proposed to be the solution. The research questions, statements of hypotheses, and objectives of the study are provided. The information concerning the population, samples, and the variables in this study are also given. Furthermore, the definitions of terms and the significance of the study are also mentioned.

Chapter two includes a review of literature and research relevant to this study.

Chapter three covers the research methodology of the study including the procedures of collecting and analyzing the data.

Chapter four presents the results of the findings.

Chapter five summarizes the study, discusses the findings, suggests the implications and recommendations for further research.