CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the present global society, learning foreign languages is very crucial and essential to livelihood. Foreign languages are important tools for communication, seeking knowledge, and understanding the cultures of the international community in the world (Ministry of Education. 2008). One of the most popular foreign languages for communication in order to connect countries and become an international language is English (Crystal. 2003).

Learning English can afford good opportunities to find good jobs to the learners. Due to the fact that most people realize the advantage of knowing English, many countries have introduced English in education curriculum, including Thailand (Chaimongkol. 2000). English is the foreign language which is prescribed by the entire basic education core curriculum (Ministry of Education. 2008). The main goal of teaching English is encouraging students to practice the four language skills. Improving all skills is important for daily life communication (Nunan. 1999). Similarly to Viriyajittra et al. (2011), they state that the objective of teaching English is helping students to find out information, knowledge and facts through using language skills.

However, a number of Thai learners cannot use English language skills properly. The level of Thai learners' English competency at high school and university levels are rather low. Many scholars state that most of Thai students cannot

communicate with native speakers in the real situations via using speaking and

listening skills properly (Chumchaiyo. 2000; Karnklang. 2003; Tatkaew. 2006).

For instance, students' reading and writing skills are unsatisfying. They need

appropriate approaches or techniques to improve their reading and writing (Jattiwat.

2000).

Reading is an essential skill for the basic education and the higher education

level (Chhabra & McCardle. 2004). It is the most important skill for learners. They

gain new knowledge, ideas, good vision and develop their thinking from reading

(Sukchotrat. 2005). In addition, reading is the most essential skill for Thai students

because they practice reading rather than other skills. Reading is crucial for working

at companies or offices in Thailand (Aksaranukhroa. 1989).

Conversely, some previous studies found the negative behavior of Thai

learners in English reading. For example, Sakonrak and Chuepanit (1999) point out

that English reading problems of teen-age are; Thai learners rarely read English

because they do not comprehend the texts and lacking of inspiration to read. This

reason causes the big problem for students. Angwattanakul (1997) confirms that most

of Thai students are in the low level of reading, they lack of suitable methods and

techniques of reading.

Although English has been taught in Thailand for many years, teaching

English reading has not been successful for many cases (Kurine. 2006; Sirisuk.

2005). Many studies prove that most Thai students have poor English reading skills.

For example, Liamsakul (1998) indicates that Thai students have difficulty in

remembering vocabulary and understanding sentences. The students did not consider

the necessity of learning English and they did not pay attention to English studies especially reading (Chaimongkol. 2000).

Unawareness of reading advantages affects Thai students to face the unsuccessfulness in reading test. From the result of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which focuses on the abilities in mathematics, reading and science of the representive students from 65 participating countries, the result reveals that the mean score of three major skills of Thai students are lower than those of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in 2012. Especially, the mean score of reading is 441 or the fiftieth rank from 65 participating countries (IPST. 2013). Similar to the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS. 2009) informs the result of O-NET test in English proficiency for grade 9 students in the academic year 2009. The mean score is 21.80 out of 100 (265,809 students in the Northeast of Thailand) and 19.57 out of 100 (19,132 students in Buri Ram, Thailand). Both data indicate that the ability of Thai students in English proficiency is low. As a matter of fact of the O-NET test in English proficiency for grade 9 students of Nonsuwanpittayakom School, Buri Ram, Thailand in the academic year 2014. The mean score is 27.46 out of 100 and the standard of reading is urgent improvable skill (NIETS. 2014).

From above data, the researcher had examined the problems and found that most students faced the problems on reading skill. Puagnadta (1999) points out that the factors which influence with the failure of English teaching are teachers, students, teaching techniques and curriculum. For instance, Lawson (1998) describes the atmosphere in English class in Thailand that Thai students always sit silently, read and say the words out loud after the teacher. The format of teaching emphasizes on

reading aloud and translation. The students lack of interaction and participation in class. Most students do not comprehend the meaning of words when they read the texts. They cannot find the main idea and understand the whole text. Because of these reasons, reading is difficult and boring for learners (Senchaowanit. 1999; Wihokto. 2003). Chandavimol (1998) indicates that Thai students fail in reading because of the teaching procedures. Teachers emphasize translating word by word or sentence than reading the passage in order to comprehend the whole text.

As reading is the crucial skill, it is a complex process which involves not only the readers' ability to read the texts but also their ability to comprehend it. Because of this reason, many teachers of English at junior high and senior high school levels find difficulties in teaching reading. Hamra and Syatriana (2010) state that reading is not an easy job, particularly in a second language. There are many students who are not able to comprehend the texts. The purpose of reading is to comprehend the meanings of the text and the comprehension depends on the ability to get individual word meanings.

Reading comprehension is an active thinking process that depends not only on comprehension skill but also on their experiences and prior knowledge in order to understand the meaning of vocabulary and sentences. The paragraphs sense the relationship among the ideas (Kustayo. 1988). Reading and reading comprehension are considered as one of the most important skills and serious problems in the English learning process in school (Dreyer & Nel. 2003; Meese. 2001). Furthermore, Hiran (1997) informs that most of Thai learners are in the low level of reading, they lack reading comprehension skill and they need appropriate methods or techniques to improve their reading.

At present, learning in the 21st century focuses on teamwork rather than individual accomplishment (Huss. 2006). Normally, the students in secondary school are teenagers. At this age, social relationships with peers are extremely important to the students. Friendships and interaction with peers are powerful motivators for young adolescents. Social interaction helps them become better readers and writers (Irvin. 1998). In addition, the study conducted by Fuchs and Fuchs (2005) reveals that students' reading ability increases from working in cooperative learning settings. Therefore, learning with peers will encourage students in reading comprehension.

Peer-assisted learning strategies or PALS is a research-based, instructional reading program developed by educators at Vanderbilt University in 1996 for students in grade 2 through grade 6 (McMaster, Fuchs & Fuchs. 2006). PALS model was designed to improve the reading skills of lower level readers, develop critical reading skills such as fluency and reading comprehension (Fuchs et al. 1997; Sporer & Brunstein. 2009). It has been documented in academic areas in order to develop students' reading fluency and comprehension (Fuchs et al. 1997; Fuchs & Fuchs. 2005; Mathes et al. 1998).

In conclusion, to manage the problems more successfully, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS) as a teaching approach whether it is able to solve the problems on grade eight students' English reading comprehension. Accordingly, PALS has been selected for this research project with the belief in its usefulness and possibility to enhance students' English reading comprehension.

1.2 Research Objectives

1.2.1 To test the efficiency of peer-assisted learning strategies in teaching English reading comprehension to grade eight students to meet the standard criterion set at 75/75.

1.2.2 To compare the students' reading comprehension achievement scores before and after learning by using peer-assisted learning strategies.

1.2.3 To evaluate students' satisfaction towards the peer-assisted learning strategies.

1.3 Research Questions

1.3.1 Do the peer-assisted learning strategies implementation enhance grade eight students' English reading comprehension?

1.3.2 Are there any differences between the students' pre-test and post-test mean scores?

1.3.3 Are the students satisfied with the peer-assisted learning strategies implementation?

1.4 Research Hypothesis

Students who learn English Reading and Writing Course through the PALS reading comprehension lesson plans will have higher learning scores on the post-test mean scores than those of pre-test with statistically significant difference at .05 level.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is aimed to investigate the peer-assisted learning strategies implementation in teaching English reading comprehension for grade eight students. It is expected to provide valuable learning process in an English classroom and also improve reading comprehension for the students who study English Reading and Writing Course. Furthermore, it would be significant teaching technique for teachers or school administrators in order to develop an effective teaching process.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Research

1.6.1 Population and Samples

The population of this study included 170 grade eight students from 4 classes who took English Reading and Writing Course (E22202) at Nonsuwanpittayakom School under Secondary Educational Service Area Office 32, Buri Ram province, in the academic year 2015.

The samples of the study were 40 grade eight students who took English Reading and Writing Course (E22202) at Nonsuwanpittayakom School under Secondary Educational Service Area Office 32, Buri Ram province, in the second semester of the academic year 2015, class 2/1 was selected to be the sample by using cluster random sampling technique from 4 classes consisting of low, moderate and high proficiency students.

1.6.2 Variables of the Study

1. The independent variables were the PALS reading comprehension lesson plans constructed by the researcher.

2. The dependent variables were the effectiveness index of the PALS reading comprehension lesson plans, learners' achievement, and learners' satisfaction towards the PALS lesson plans.

1.7 Definitions of Key Terms

1.7.1 Reading refers to the complicated process of constructing meaning from written texts, readers translate or decode the meaning of symbols or words and comprehend the texts.

1.7.2 Reading Comprehension is the more complex reading process. Readers use their own prior knowledge and experiences to identify the main idea and supporting details for each paragraph or passage.

1.7.3 Peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS) refers to the strategies that the researcher uses in teaching English reading comprehension. It consists of three main activities within each session: partner reading and retell, paragraph shrinking, and prediction relay.

1.7.3.1 Partner reading and retell refers to the activity in PALS in which each paired reader reads for five minutes. The stronger reader helps the weaker reader with any unknown words. Subsequently, the weaker reader retells the events in the reading text in order.

1.7.3.2 Paragraph shrinking refers to the activity in which the reading pairs summarize the main idea or the important points of the paragraph in a statement of 10 words or less.

1.7.3.3 Prediction relay refers to the activity in which the reading pairs make predictions about what will happen next in a story.

1.7.3.4 Tutor refers to the stronger reader student in the reading pair who helps the weaker reader.

1.7.3.5 Tutee refers to the weaker reader student who is tutored.

1.7.4 PALS reading comprehension lesson plans refer to lesson plans which are designed based on the English Reading and Writing Course (E22202) curriculum of Nonsuwanpittayakom School. They include reading comprehension tasks prepared by the researcher. There are eight lesson plans as follows:

1. Lesson Plan 1 : I live in New York

2. Lesson Plan 2 : A Healthy Choice

3. Lesson Plan 3 : Short story

4. Lesson Plan 4 : The Queen's Garden Parties

5. Lesson Plan 5 : Breakfast around the world

6. Lesson Plan 6 : Sepak Takraw

7. Lesson Plan 7 : Google

8. Lesson Plan 8 : Life-saving fish

1.7.5 Students' learning achievement refers to the students' scores from achievement test (Pre-test and post-test) and the scores which are given from the students' understanding of the reading texts during PALS' activities.

1.7.6 Criterion Set 75/75 is the scored used to find out the efficiency of the reading comprehension plans as follows:

The first criterion set at 75 (Efficiency of the process) is the percentage of learners' total mean scores from the exercises scores from the reading comprehension plans.

The second criterion set at 75 (Efficiency of the outcomes) is the percentage of learners' total mean scores from the achievement test (Post-test).

1.7.7 Students refer to grade eight students who learn English Reading and Writing Course (E22202) at Nonsuwanpittayakom School under Secondary Educational Service Area Office 32, Buri Ram province, Thailand, in the academic year 2015.

1.8 Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, the researcher has given a statement of the problem of the study. This is followed by research objectives and research questions. Then, scope and limitations of the research and definitions of key terms are presented. To attain the purposes of the study, the literature review is presented in the next chapter.