

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

English is spoken by one-fourth of the people in the world; more than seventy countries designate English as their official language; more than one hundred countries around the world consider English to be the main foreign language. Clearly, English is a global language (Crystal, 2003). Due to the above reason, the ability to be able to use English is foundational for people in most Asian countries where English as a foreign language (EFL) is used. English is a tool for them to know more people, to access information over the Internet, to develop and expand international business in the global market, and to connect to the whole world. The development of English education has been one of the essential educational issues for many EFL countries in Asia.

In general, learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. One crucial factor in all four skills that underlies the success of second language acquisition is the amount of vocabulary one possesses. As Hill (2005: 1) noted in her recent work about the importance of vocabulary teaching and learning that while grammar is important, words are the building blocks to communication. This implies that knowledge of the grammatical structure plays an important part in language learning and equally important is that of knowing the meanings of words in a text. A similar argument is made by McCarthy in an interview for Cambridge Connection (2001, cited in Fan, 2003: 222), in which

he commented that vocabulary not only forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, it is also the biggest problem for most learners.

In light of this, mounting concern has arisen over vocabulary acquisition and particularly, vocabulary learning strategies in many Asian classrooms (Gu & Johnson. 1996; Schmitt. 1997; Fan. 2003; Gu. 2007). The striking message concerning university students' lack of vocabulary and limited choice of learning strategies sets out to uncover whether similar deficiencies exist among secondary students since the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition stresses the importance of building a strong vocabulary foundation at early age. There is a compelling need to understand how students acquire vocabulary by looking at the strategies they employ in lexical learning in the early years of schooling.

Though it seems likely that limited L2 vocabulary would affect elementary school EFL learners in carrying out the basic skills in English, L2 vocabulary learning at early age is still largely un-researched. Given the importance of vocabulary to oral and written language comprehension, it is astounding that there have been few experimental studies on English vocabulary learning among elementary school children. This problem not only affects local students but also worries many language teachers. Recent evidence of growing concern about inadequate vocabulary of L2 learners is pointed out by the English language education section (Ministry of Education. 2002) in its report.

“... there is mounting evidence that many learners, particularly in EFL contexts, are not developing their lexicons to levels that would permit them to communicate, read, or write adequately in English, despite years of formal study.” (Atay & Kurt. 2006: 56)

To compensate for this, the Ministry of Education (2006) has developed an English vocabulary lists for Thai schools to raise students' awareness of how words are formed and related to each other, such as synonyms, antonyms, collocations and idiomatic uses of words. Nevertheless, teaching of vocabulary as a discrete topic or introducing the vocabulary learning strategies is still rare in Thailand secondary schools. Vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is the first, the second or a foreign language (Decarrico, 2001). It is related to other aspects of language learning and use. It is also crucial to the learner's overall language acquisition (Gao, 2003). Therefore, vocabulary learning is an important topic that needs a deeper investigation. This study will focus on the issue of vocabulary learning strategies. "Learning strategies" in this study means specific plans or steps that language learners intentionally employ to improve reception, storage, retention, and retrieval of information to a second or foreign language (Oxford, 2003). This study is so far the smallest-scale investigation of EFL high school students' language learning strategies in Thailand to date. This study is intended to provide a much greater insight into the instructional needs of young Thai EFL language learners by exploring the young learners' strategy use and the role of vocabulary learning in their English learning experience. Throughout the research findings, this study will contribute to providing a more comprehensive picture of vocabulary learning use of individual variables affecting the choice of language strategy use of Thai high school students in the EFL context.

## **1.2 Purposes of the Study**

In view of the above situation, a study is carried out to investigate the students' perceptions and their actual use of strategies. As different learning tasks require different strategies, it is worthwhile looking at how learners learn vocabulary and the strategies they use to discover and retain word meaning.

The present study aims to investigate which Discovery Strategies and Consolidation Strategies are most frequently used by the high school learners of English and their perceptions of the usefulness of the strategies. More importantly, the study enables the researcher to examine the features and behaviors of "good learners" by means of a think-aloud task and semi-structured interview.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

In particular, the research is designed to answer the following questions.

1.3.1 Which Discovery Strategies and Consolidation Strategies do the grade 12 students and the high proficient students use most frequently?

1.3.2 Which Discovery Strategies and Consolidation Strategies do the grade 12 students and the high proficient students perceive as most useful?

1.3.3 Is there a significant difference between the use of strategies by high proficient students and other participants in the study?

1.3.4 How do the grade 12 high proficient students perceive vocabulary learning?

## **1.4 Significance of the Research**

This study is important and useful for both language teachers and learners because it will highlight the use of vocabulary learning strategies, shed light on the conceptions and misconceptions of vocabulary learning. It will be intended that the study would enhance teacher's understanding of the vocabulary acquisition among the learners so that adjustments could be made to vocabulary teaching as well as strategy training.

## **1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Research**

This is an exploratory study of students' vocabulary learning strategies. The population are all grade 12 students at Romburipitthayakhom (Ratchamungklapisek) School in Buriram Province. The subjects were 200 grade 12 students, aged between 16-18 years old. In order to have an in-depth study, twenty participants, who is belonging to the top end of the proficiency scale according to the total marks of reading, writing, listening and speaking papers in the second semester examination of the grade 11, was selected for the think-aloud vocabulary tasks and semi-structured interviews to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by high proficient students. Although the population size in the study were also small, the findings of this study have highlighted preliminary indications of the vocabulary learning strategies used by the high school L2 learners and their perceptions of the usefulness of the strategies in the local context and enriched the research on vocabulary learning strategies. It would be beneficial to replicate this study on larger and different populations in order to examine the dynamic and complex nature of vocabulary acquisition among L2 learners.

Methodologically speaking, the data from the questionnaire, think-aloud vocabulary tasks and the interviews were self-reported by the participants. Like any studies of a similar nature, there is always a question of how much self-reports reflect reality. Likewise, the think-aloud vocabulary tasks and interview data only provided insights into the possible strategic behavior of the high proficient students. Nevertheless, the anonymity of the questionnaire and the nature of the think-aloud vocabulary tasks considerably reduced the possibility of false reports. The time for conducting the current research was the second semester of the academic year 2011 intentionally.

## **1.6 Definitions of Key Terms**

Here are the explanations and definitions of the key terms used in this study:

**1.6.1 Perceptions** refer to the interpretation or impression based on one's understanding of something (Concise Oxford Dictionary. 1995: 1014). In this study, how the learners perceive their own pattern of strategy use is a substantial aspect of investigation.

**1.6.2 Actual Use** refers to the selection and application of strategies made by the 200 twelfth grade students, and 20 high proficient students, including the Discovery Strategy, and Consolidation Strategy.

**1.6.3 Vocabulary Learning Strategies** refers to specific actions, steps, techniques, physical behaviors or mental operations consciously or subconsciously employed by learners to get the word form and meaning and then consolidate the word form and meaning in memory before they can use the word properly. Hence, vocabulary learning strategies can be divided into two main categories: 1) strategies

for discovering a new word's meaning; and 2) strategies for consolidating a word (Nation. 1990; Schmitt. 1997). For this research, analysis of strategies will be based on Nation's (1990) and Schmitt's (1997) classification of discovery and consolidation strategies.

**1.6.3.1 Discovery Strategies** refers to the strategies for learners to discover a new word meaning fall mainly into four types, namely, guessing or lexical inferencing, analysis of word features, use of the dictionary, and asking other people.

**1.6.3.2 Consolidation Strategies** refers to the strategies which aiming at committing the words learned to memory. The words learned to memory consist of word association, grouping, semantic-processing strategies, the keyword method, and repetition strategies.

**1.6.4 Thai EFL Students** refers to the 200 high school students at the Romburipitthayakhom (Ratchamungklapisek) School, Buriram Province, Thailand who study English as a foreign language (EFL) in academic year 2010-2011 in non-English speaking surrounding.

**1.6.5 High Proficient Students** refer to 20 grade 12 students at Romburipitthayakhom (Ratchamungklapisek) School in Buriram province who are studying English as foreign language in academic year 2011 in non-English speaking surrounding. Their English scores of the second semester of the grade 11 ranged from 70-100.

## **1.7 Overviews of the Study**

This thesis addresses the role of vocabulary learning strategies in learning vocabulary in English as foreign language. The current investigation includes five

chapters. Chapter One introduces the background to the study and the growing concern about inadequate vocabulary of L2 learners which gives rise to the purpose and the significance of the study. Chapter Two reviews the conceptual and theoretical framework on learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategies and research on good learners. Chapter Three outlines the research design, instruments and data analysis in relation to the research questions. Chapter Four presents the results and discussions of the quantitative data from the questionnaire and qualitative data from the think-aloud vocabulary task and the semi-structured interview. Finally, the last chapter, Chapter Five, sums up the present study and offers suggestions for future research.

### **1.8 Summary of the Chapter**

In the introductory chapter, the background of the research describes the current situation of vocabulary learning and teaching in the Thai high school context. Besides, the purposes and significance of the study are identified to set the framework of the study. The current research is attempted to identify the basic assumption, scope and limitation of the study. This research also provided the definitions of key terms used to define the research variables and contributions of the research. In the next chapter, Chapter Two, relevant literature for this study is reviewed.