

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

This study investigates Thai learners' conceptualizations of two grammatical categories in English: tense and aspect. The term *conceptualization* is used here to refer to the ability to interpret and identify the semantic meaning of the verb form. *Tense-aspect conceptualization*, thus, means the ability to recognize the tense-aspect marking of a verb and its meaning.

*Tense* is a *grammatical category* of a verb when it is used in a predicate of a sentence. *Tense markers* are added to a verb to represent a time reference of the event being referred to by the verb. In English, there are three (grammatical) tenses: *the present tense*, *the past tense* and *the future tense*. Each tense is marked by a specific tense marker, as shown in the following table.

Table 1.1: *Tense and Tense Marker in English*

| TENSE          | TENSE MARKER                     |                 |
|----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
|                | <i>Singular</i>                  | <i>Plural</i>   |
| <i>Present</i> | -s (except for 'I')              | ('zero' marker) |
| <i>Past</i>    | -ed (except for irregular verbs) |                 |
| <i>Future</i>  | will, shall, be going to         |                 |

The semantic information represented by a tense marker is the time reference being made by the speaker. Time reference is not an *absolute* time determined by a

clock or a calendar. Rather, it is a *relative* time, relative to the speech time or the time the speaker says the utterance. Therefore, this three-way *tense marking system* can represent more than three time references, especially when combined with the semantic information supplied by another grammatical category, the *aspect*.

*Aspect* is a grammatical category that adds information about how the speaker views the state of an event. There are 4 grammatical aspects: simple, perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive. Similar to tense, aspect is also marked by a specific marker, as shown below.

Table 1.2: *Aspect and Aspect Marker in English*

| ASPECT                     | ASPECT MARKER    |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Simple</i>              |                  |
| <i>Perfect</i>             | Have + -en       |
| <i>Progressive</i>         | Be + -ing        |
| <i>Perfect Progressive</i> | Have been + -ing |

As in the tense marking system, the four-way aspect marking system can represent more than four views of the state of an event, when combined with the semantic information supplied by the grammatical category *tense*. As such, the combination of both tense and aspect results in the complex tense-aspect system that accommodates a set of 12 grammatical markers used to represent the division of three time lines combined with four aspects. (The tense and aspect systems are described in greater detail in Chapter 2.)

Because of the complex interplay of the multiple form-function mappings, usage of the English tense-aspect system has been widely accepted to be one of the most difficult grammatical areas for learners of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) to fully master (Richards, 1981; Riddle, 1986; Hinkel, 1992). In fact, the tense-aspect system is often introduced very early, and it has occupied a prominent role in ESL/EFL classes. However, despite several years of learning, even advanced learners of English still have substantial difficulty with the tense-aspect system.

Although researchers have attempted to investigate the difficulty in the acquisition of English tense and aspect, the primary causes of learners' difficulty still remain unclear. Research suggests that tense and aspect errors result from learners' lack of understanding of the referential relationships that exist between time reference and aspectual properties in association with their grammatical markers. In acquiring the English tense-aspect system, learners need to learn all the grammatical forms designated for all tense-aspect combinations. They also need to have clear conceptual understanding of the time reference and aspectual property encoded in each form in order to choose the one that best fits a certain situation. This probably explains why ESL/EFL learners struggle so much with understanding and producing the correct form of the verb for a particular situation.

With regard to conceptualization of time, Levinson (1983) maintained that although the domains of time and their references exist in all languages, the divisions of time domains may be conceptualized differently among speakers of different languages. Hinkel (1992) argued that "time attributes," which include "perceptual, conceptual and cultural divisions of time vary greatly among language communities"

(p. 557). Moreover, she contended that the location of an event in time is “subjective and depends on how people perceive and experience temporal contexts in which events occur” (Hinkel, 1997, p. 290). Such differences can present a great deal of problems for EFL/ESL learners. According to Kripke (1991), the relationships between perceptions of time and the time reference are “determined by the conventions of the language” and are often “language specific” (p. 84). In learning a second language, L2 learners often resort to their prior knowledge of L1 and transfer concepts from their L1 to aid comprehension of L2. Thus, if the time reference in an L2 does not fit the learners’ conceptualization in their L1, these learners are likely to have difficulty establishing a correspondence between L1 and L2 systems (Donnellan, 1991). In other words, in order to acquire the L2 system, learners need first to develop contextual beliefs shared by native speakers of the L2 speech community and correspondingly conceptualize time reference in ways native speakers do.

Added to the diversity of time conceptualizations, the fact that various language systems employ different linguistic devices to represent these time references also contributes to the complexity in acquiring the English tense-aspect system. English utilizes auxiliaries and/or inflectional morphology to refer to time and aspect, whereas in many other languages, the concept of time and aspect is conveyed by other means (Levinson, 1983). In Thai, for example, time and aspect are realized through lexical items such as nouns and adverbs or implicitly through contextual assumptions. With the differences in both forms and time concepts, speakers of languages without inflectional morphology, such as Thai, may find it even harder to establish the relationships between L1 and L2 grammatical markers and their references to time and aspect.

Because the relationships between forms and their meanings with regard to tense and aspect are not simple or obvious, L2 learners may not acquire the tense-aspect meanings and their morphological forms simultaneously. Although it remains inconclusive whether learners acquire grammatical forms before meanings or vice versa, a few studies have suggested that knowledge of morphological forms seems to precede tense-aspect meanings and functions. For example, in a study conducted by Coppetiers (1987), highly-educated nonnative speakers with near-native proficiency in French had acquired tense-aspect forms, while their perceptions of meanings were not native-like. Coppetiers suggested that the non-native speakers' perceptions of tense-aspect meanings appeared to be strongly affected by their L1. Speakers of languages that lack L2 morphological forms may perceive L2 time and aspect according to their L1 conceptual paradigms, resulting in their interpretations of L2 tense-aspect meanings in ways different from native speakers of languages with morphological forms.

In line with Coppetiers's study, Hinkel (1992) found that non-native English speakers conceptualized time references of English tense-aspect markers differently from the way native speakers (NSs) did, resulting in constraints on their usage of the English tense-aspect system. Hinkel concluded that confusion over tense-aspect markers and their meanings among non-native English speakers may be due to their inability to develop new conceptualizations of how time is referred to in relation to aspectual properties within the given contexts in which certain forms are used.

Given that the Thai language uses a different linguistic device to mark the concepts of time and aspect (i.e., Thai verbs do not inflect for time and aspect in the same way as English verbs do), such grammatical verb forms in English may seem

confusing and inaccessible to Thai speakers, particularly for those with low English proficiency. For learners with relatively high English proficiency who tend to acquire grammatical forms, the concepts of time and aspect may still pose some difficulty for them to fully acquire the whole system. This could be due to the fact that Thai speakers conceptualize time and aspect in English differently from native English speakers.

Based on the above rationale, the goal of this study was to investigate conceptualizations of English tense and aspect among Thai learners with high, intermediate and low English proficiency levels, as opposed to NSs' conceptualizations. In so doing, it is hoped that the results would reveal the proximity in conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property encoded in the English grammatical tense-aspect markers between Thai learners and native English speakers.

The organization of this research study is as follows. In this chapter, research questions, objectives, hypotheses, scope, limitations, significance of the study and key term definitions are presented. Chapter 2 reviews literature relevant to the study. Chapter 3 introduces research methodology. In Chapter 4, the results of the study are presented. Chapter 5 provides the discussion of the results. Finally, Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and implications of the study.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property encoded in English tense-aspect markers among Thai learners of English at three English proficiency levels in terms of proximity to those of native

English speakers (NSs). In so doing, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

(1) What are the conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property of English tense and aspect among Thai learners at three English proficiency levels: high, intermediate and low?

(2) What is the degree of proximity to the native English speaker norms in terms of conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property among the three groups of Thai learners at high, intermediate and low English proficiency levels?

### **1.3 Objective of the Study**

The objective of this study was two-fold:

(1) To investigate conceptualizations of tense and aspect in English by Thai learners at three different proficiency levels: high, intermediate and low, using conceptualizations of native English speakers as a baseline.

(2) To examine the degree of proximity to the native English speaker norms in terms of conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property among Thai learners at high, intermediate and low English proficiency levels.

### **1.4 Statement of Hypotheses**

To carry out the objectives of this study, the following hypotheses were formulated and tested.

The conceptualizations of tense and aspect in English among Thai learners of English differ at varying degrees from those of native English speakers. Conceptualizations of Thai learners with high English proficiency more closely

approximate the native speaker norms than conceptualizations of learners with lower proficiency levels.

### 1.5 Scope of the Study

As the present study attempted to identify Thai learners' potential problems in comprehending the English tense-aspect system, the research was undertaken as follows.

(1) The data-gathering process was conducted in a cross-sectional design using Thai learners of English at three proficiency levels: high, intermediate and low. Conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property of these three sample groups were then compared with those of native English speakers. The research methodology is discussed in Chapter 3.

(2) This study was primarily an exploratory study. It was decided to explore conceptualizations of time and aspect that denote only the factual account of an event, and not non-factual or predictive. This decision was based on the assertion that only the present and past tenses in English express the factual account of a situation (Huddleston, 1984; Quirk et al., 1972); future events are merely predictive and thus are expressed by means of a modal auxiliary: *will* or *shall*. The exclusion of all future forms at this stage was to avoid the interpretations of time and aspectual references based on speculative events, which may be more subjective than those based on factual events. Consequently, the present study investigated conceptualizations of time and aspectual references of the present and past tense-aspect markers only. All the future forms with the future modal auxiliaries were not in the scope of this study. Therefore, with the present and past time lines combined with aspectual markers for



simple, perfect, progressive and perfect progressive, the following tense-aspect forms were investigated in this study:

- Present time: (1) Present Simple  
 (2) Present Perfect  
 (3) Present Progressive  
 (4) Present Perfect Progressive
- Past time: (5) Past Simple  
 (6) Past Perfect  
 (7) Past Progressive  
 (8) Past Perfect Progressive

### **1.6 Limitations of the Study**

The present study aimed to provide patterns in the comprehension of English tense meanings among Thai learners of English at different proficiency levels in terms of proximity to the native English speaker norms. Nonetheless, it had the following limitations.

(1) The decision that Thai university teachers of English would represent the high-proficiency group was based on the presumption that their language ability was high. However, their actual proficiency was not evaluated as it was not viable to request teachers who were randomly chosen from different universities to take the same English proficiency test that the participants in the intermediate and low proficiency groups took. Despite this limitation, care was taken to assess English proficiency of the students who were recruited to represent the intermediate and low proficiency groups. These groups were evaluated on the basis of their scores from the

DPU-Test of English Proficiency (DPU-TEP) administered at one time, and thus a division between ability levels should be possible.

(2) The sample groups used in the present study were relatively small. Additionally, the intermediate and low English proficiency groups were recruited from a single university. The investigation may limit the generalizability to students in other contexts.

(3) The cross-sectional design of this study could be viewed as reflecting only one phase of learners' language development. This limits one's ability to draw strong inferences about the learner's actual pattern of English tense and aspect comprehension at different developmental stages. However, it is hoped that the findings of the study could present some insights into learners' patterns of English tense-aspect acquisition that can be useful for the teaching of the English tense-aspect system to Thai learners of English.

## **1.7 Definitions of Key Terms**

For the purpose of the study, the key terms are defined as follows.

### **(1) Conceptualization**

*Conceptualization* is used in this study to refer to the ability to interpret and identify the semantic meaning of the verb form used in a predicate of a sentence. *Conceptualization of tense and aspect*, thus, refers to the ability to interpret time reference and aspectual property encoded in the tense and aspect marking of a verb and to identify its meaning.

## (2) Time

*Time* refers to “actual clock time in our physical world ... as measured by clocks, calendars, or other such devices” (Marquez & Bowen [1983] as cited in DeCarrico, 1986, p. 667).

## (3) Tense and Time Reference

*Tense* is a grammatical term referring to the forms that verbs take to represent a *time reference* of the event being referred to: either the present or the past. *Time reference* conveyed by *tense* can be said to be the *conceptual time*, i.e. it is not an absolute time determined by a clock or a calendar. Rather, it is a *relative time*, relative to the time the utterance is said. In English, a verb is inflected to express tense or time reference of an event as happening in the past or at present. Reference to the future time can be made in a number of ways such as by using the modal auxiliary *will*, *shall*, or the semi-auxiliary *be going to*. (Please refer to Table 1.1 on page 1.)

*Tense* is often used in combination with *aspect* marking to indicate the ways the speaker views the event/situation expressed by the verb at a particular time signified by tense.

## (4) Aspect

*Aspect* is an additional feature of time reference, which is independent of its relation to any reference time. Aspect gives the details about how the speaker views the situation described in terms of *internal temporal properties*, for instance focusing on the completion, continuation, or habitual occurrence of the event/situation.

Although aspect is common to human languages, different linguistic forms are used to represent aspect among various language communities. In English, aspect is encoded in particular grammatical forms such as the progressive, perfect or simple past morphemes. (Please refer to Table 1.2 on page 2.)

With the combination of time and aspect marking, English has 12 forms of verb, which are commonly referred to in grammar textbooks as “tenses”:

Present time: Present Simple, Present Perfect, Present Progressive, and Present Perfect Progressive

Past time: Past Simple, Past Perfect, Past Progressive, and Past Perfect Progressive

Future time: Future Simple, Future Perfect, Future Progressive, and Future Perfect Progressive

Yule (1998) argued that the present, past and future tense forms can be differentiated in terms of “remoteness” and the “factual account” of an event. “Remote” situations are referred to by the past tense, whereas the present and future tenses are considered “non-remote”. In terms of the factual account of an event, the present and past tenses are regarded as “factual,” while the future forms imply “non-factual” situations.

In line with Yule’s (1998) argument, some researchers and educators (e.g., Huddleston, 1984; Quirk et al., 1972) characterized English as containing only two tenses: the present and past. Future events are regarded as predictive, and thus they are conveyed by means of a modal auxiliary or semi-auxiliary.

## 1.8 Significance of the Study

The present study is worth conducting for several reasons.

(1) There has been no study to date that investigates differences in conceptualizations between native English speakers and Thai learners of English with regard to time reference and aspectual property in relation to English tense and aspect. In order for teachers to correct learner errors in tense usage, it is extremely important to understand how Thai learners as opposed to native English speakers conceptualize time and aspect conveyed by the tense and aspect markers.

(2) It has been suggested that EFL learners at different proficiency levels, particularly those whose first languages (L1s) lack morphological tense markers, have different kinds of problems with usage of the English tense-aspect system. Yet, there has been no investigation in any great detail into what kinds of problems these learners might have at different stages of their second language development. This study aimed to identify some problems of learners' difficulty in acquiring the English tense-aspect system that may arise from their diverse conceptualizations of time and aspect.

(3) Many grammar textbooks are written for ESL classrooms with largely speakers whose first languages have inflections of the verb. Thus, the terminology associated with time and aspect conceptualizations and grammatical references used in those published materials should be more easily understood by L1 learners whose first languages have verb tense-aspect inflections than by those whose L1s lack morphological tenses. The results of the study are expected to reveal the extent to which Thai learners who have been exposed to many years of English training

understand such terminology associated with time and aspectual references in the same way as they are understood by native English speakers.

(4) The findings are also expected to shed some light on the acquisition pattern of the English tense-aspect system among Thai learners. Additional sources of information as to which tense forms are more accessible to Thai learners than others could be a valuable tool to determine learner problems at different stages in their L2 development.

The pedagogical implications of this study should accordingly be clear. An additional source of learner problems regarding diverse conceptualizations of time and aspect could be useful for teachers in aiding them to develop more informed methods and design more appropriate materials for teaching English tense and aspect to Thai learners.