

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Postgraduate students are often considered budding academics. In Thailand, like elsewhere, they need to deal successfully with changes and expectations from society: they are expected to participate in the academic discourse of the local academic community as well as the global one. As academic discourse often entails understanding and using general and academic English. In short, they need to use it effectively.

For those who have spent some time doing their research in English-speaking countries such as England, Australia, or the US, one common concern for them, among others, would be how to participate and function effectively within the new discourse community. In this case, the demand is obvious: they have to use academic English to conduct their research and report their findings.

Usually, program providers implement academic support structures to assist postgraduate students in reaching their full potential and becoming leaders in the scholarly community. The University of Melbourne, for instance, has created an online course, a community of practice called *Postgraduate Essentials* (Brooks and Fyffe, 2004) as a community for new students to prepare themselves for their study. Today, program providers put in place support structures to help new students, enabling them to engage effectively in a new community of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Postgraduate students such as MBA or DBA students at local universities in Thailand are often required to conduct research in Thai and use Thai to report their findings and writing up their theses. Nevertheless, as novice academics, they often have to read a great number of English texts, as they are major sources of research information. They are expected by the society, including the academic community, to know English and use it appropriately. In short, they are required to possess certain levels of academic English skills. In addition, one of the admission requirements for postgraduate programs in Thailand is that the students demonstrate adequate levels of English

proficiency; for example, a TOEFL / TU-GET / CU-TEP score of 550 or IELTS of 6.0 is a common requirement.

It can be said that English has become an integral part of Thailand's graduate education. In other words, new members (budding academics) need to gain their membership through their English ability. Such a gate-keeping measure, a common practice among higher institutions, is a means to ensure that candidates are equipped with academic English skills ready to participate effectively in the academic community and beyond. English, in addition to being a tool, is also a status symbol (Pennycook, 1994).

Thai academics are expected to have 'sound knowledge' of Thai and English, among other qualities such as critical thinking and IT skills. They possess certain dispositions, one of which is the drive to search for truths. They are expected to function as active researchers, excel in administrative, teaching, and academic matters. In academic institutions, Thai scholars, moreover, need to earn their academic titles such as assistant professorship and associate professorship.

While recognizing the fact that English is important, it usually takes some time for learners to develop proficiency in English as a foreign language for academic purposes. From the socio-cultural perspective, those postgraduate students, as they are acquiring the language, are being socialized into the new community (Ochs, 2002). As we know, there are many discourse communities, and different discourse communities have different ways of using English for their academic or professional purposes. There are 'technical terms' and jargon to master; there are conventions of usage to follow such as the use of loan words and calques.

1.2 PURPOSES

The aims were to investigate the characteristics of the graduate students' uses of English, their conceptions of Thai academics in business administration, their perceived competency, their perceived problems and difficulties, their perceived ability to cope with the problems, and their perceived English support needed from the establishment. One of the aims was to find the complex relationship among their uses of English, their personal characteristics, their perceived English competence, coping ability, and their perceived identity.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research asked the following questions:

1. What were their personal characteristics?
2. How did the student participants perceive their English proficiency?
3. What were their conceptions of the Thai academics? How did they perceive their identity as Thai academics?
4. Across the four skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, what were their levels of English use with other members of the Thai academic community?
5. What were their levels of problems/difficulties in their use of English?
6. How well or effectively could they cope with the problems/challenges?
7. Was the support they received from the university adequate?
8. What was the relationship among their personal factors, perceived identity, use of English, perceived English competency, problems in language use, and perceived English support?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to investigate the use of English among graduate students in business administration by investigating a broader range of factors and contexts of English use. It did so by analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data and perceiving the student participants as novice academics. It is significant because it attempts to probe more deeply into the complex relationship among their personal factors and English use. It is significant because it is perhaps the first comprehensive study on the use of English among Thai academics.

1.5 RATIONALE

As a result of the strong growth of graduate studies, there are now many research students in Thailand who are entering various discourse communities. These communities of practice, explicitly or implicitly, require that their members acquire and use academic English within and beyond their fields (Morita, 2004). The process of equipping the students with adequate academic English requires more than teaching them academic English as prescribed in the curriculum or textbooks. In the context of international students in English-speaking countries such as in Australia, Adamson (1993, cited in Wilson, 1997, p. 767) has argued that

international students need academic, cultural, and linguistic competencies to tackle university study.

To be competent in academic discourse requires their active participation in the academic discourse community over a certain period. This process of socialization is a complex process and is often non-linear. This developmental process, undoubtedly, requires ‘time’, as they need to engage in the academic English activities. In short, they need to learn the rules of ‘the market’ and adjust what Bourdieu called ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1991). From this perspective, new members need to engage in the activities of the discourse community.

Realizing that this process is complex, dynamic, and cultural, degree providers often put in place a series of academic interventions such as seminars and conferences for the novices to ‘transform’ themselves into experts. In other words, efforts are made to help the new students participate effectively in the new discourse community. Through the process, they will become legitimate participants within the periphery of the new discourse community (Wenger, 1998; Lemke, 2002). This process takes time. Academic support is thus a crucial element.

Novices in any field have many roles to play. They need to use academic English to gain membership and participate in many discourse communities, as there are many of them within the Thai academic community. Indeed, there are other discourse communities that focus on and communicate about particular disciplines, or domains of inquiry. For example, there are sets of rules for the field of accounting. These communities have their own professional organizations and publications within which group members communicate about topics of interest to scholars who are working in the same discipline. Again, they have their own conventions, rules, standards, assumptions, and ways of approaching topics. Therefore, another task of the novices is to learn how to communicate appropriately and effectively within their own discipline and beyond. Moreover, among the scholarly community, it is regarded that doctoral and master’s degree holders/candidates are novice scholars who should be capable of using English to debate a wide range of issues. In addition, most postgraduate candidates are required to demonstrate their competence in scholarly research, which often involves extensive use of English. In the process, for example, they are expected to work closely with faculty members whose interests are similar to their own. This demands their active participation and dedication (Benz, 1996).

This research aims to study the process of DPU postgraduate students' engagement in the new discourse community. Even though the students are going to write their theses in Thai (L1), in the process, they have to read a great deal of English texts such as theses and articles. Furthermore, they are expected to be able to participate successfully in the existing academic communities (disciplinary community, Thai academic community, and global community). One of the requirements is to use English effectively within their field of expertise. Thus, in order to participate in the new context, they are required to use English to penetrate the myriad academic discourse communities, including establishing effective relationships with their instructors, classmates, peers, and scholars in their fields.

This study will investigate non-English-speaking graduate students (Thais) as they are being socialized into their community of practice. The new discourse community they have entered at the beginning of their program can be termed an academic community in business administration. This new community has its own standards, rules, assumptions, and expectations that govern communication within the community. An important part of joining the new community is learning how to communicate appropriately and effectively within it - how to communicate using the same language in order to function well within the new context. English is one aspect of their participation.

In conclusion, from a socio-cultural perspective, graduate students are in the process of becoming new members who are expected to be able to cope with academic English within Thai academic discourse. They are in the process of what Wenger (1998) called legitimate peripheral participation, transforming their identity. An in-depth understanding of their participation process as well as factors influencing their participation and new identities is worth an in-depth investigation.

1.6 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Below are the definitions of the terms used in this study.

Thai Academic Discourse refers to the ways members of the Thai academic community (teachers, researchers, scholars, professionals, and graduate students) use the language, Thai and English, to discuss, argue, and convey their thoughts, opinions, and feelings on matters or issues within their fields or related fields.

Thai Academic Community refers to a Thai academic community where members (teachers, researchers, scholars, professionals, and graduate students) are connected to the academy in some way, individuals who also use academic English to communicate their shared ideas and feelings.

Perceived English Competency is defined as a student participant's general level of ability in English, measured by the self-assessment questionnaire developed by the researcher.

Perceived Identity is defined as an individual student's self-report of how he or she perceives him/herself as a Thai academic in business administration and as part of the Thai academic community.

Perceived Coping Ability refers to students' self-report of their overall ability to deal with the demands of English use in their graduate study. The ability is assessed by the questionnaire developed by the researcher. This scale consists of seven items and has demonstrated reliability and validity. Responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (scored 1) to "strongly agree" (5). In this study, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .85.

English Use Within the Academic Community refers to the use of English of the respondents within the academic community. This scale consists of five items and has demonstrated reliability and validity. Responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never" (scored 1) to "always" (5).

English Support from the University refers to the respondents' perception of the English support they need from the university. This scale consists of five items and has demonstrated reliability and validity. Responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (scored 1) to "strongly agree" (5). In this study, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .77.

Perceived Problems in English Use refers to the respondents' perception of the problems and difficulties they have experienced from their use of English within the academic community. There are four sub-constructs within this concept: Perceived Problems in Listening Skills, Perceived Problems in Speaking Skills, Perceived Problems in Reading Skills, and Perceived Problems in Writing Skills. Responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (scored 1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Graduate Business Students refer to the MBA (Master of Business Administration) and DBA (Doctorate in Business Administration) students of Dhurakij Pundit University for the first semester of the academic year 2009.

1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study only investigates 131 Thai graduate students. Any generalization of the findings should recognize the context and scope of this study.

1.8 EXPECTED BENEFITS

As it employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, it is expected that this research would create an in-depth understanding of how Thai graduate business students perceive themselves as academics, the role of English, their use English within the academic community.

It is also hoped that this insight will be useful for students as well as program providers, for they will be better informed of what, when, and where to put in place necessary English support structure, especially the academic one. In addition, this study will shed some light on the practice of academic English discourse within the Thai academic community.

1.9 OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

This report is divided into six chapters.

The first chapter, Chapter One, presents the introduction with the following topics: Background of the Study, Purposes, Research Questions, Significance of the Study, Rationale, Definitions, Limitations, Expected Benefits, and Outline of the Research Report.

The relevant literature is reviewed in Chapter Two. Topics included are: Use of English in Thailand, Use of English within the Thai Academic Communities, and Literature on the Use of English among members of the Thai Academic Communities.

Chapter Three explains the research methodology. Chapter Four presents the findings, followed by the discussions of findings in Chapter Five. The summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations of the research are presented in the last chapter, Chapter Six.