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# Enhancing the development of speaking skills for non-native speakers of English

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## Abstract

Speaking is one of the four macro skills to be developed as a means of effective communication in both first and second language learning contexts. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy environment, how to increase speaking competence and confidence for undergraduate students tends to be a crucial question among instructors. This concern led to a qualitative research design as an action study in a regular course employing a task-based approach. The findings indicated that confidence, creativity of topics, and speaking competence were the key aspects of improvement when speaking to the audience.

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*Keywords:* English speaking development; factors enhancing EFL/ESL speaking skills.

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## 1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the four macro skills necessary for effective communication in any language, particularly when speakers are not using their mother tongue. As English is universally used as a means of communication, especially in the internet world, English speaking skills should be developed along with the other skills so that these integrated skills will enhance communication achievement both with native speakers of English and other members of the international community. Because of the significant role of speaking in action, Bailey (2005) and Goh (2007) detailed how to enhance the development of speaking by means of syllabus design, principles of teaching, types of tasks and materials, and speaking assessment.

In the Thai context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), instructors regularly ask the question why the majority of undergraduate students are unable to speak English confidently, especially for communication in real situations with international speakers. One among many reasons to take into consideration might be a lack of confidence in terms of anxiety about making errors as stated by Trent (2009) and in other related studies. Basically, most Thai undergraduate students have studied English for approximately 8-10 years before entering the tertiary level. Based on the question of how to increase the speaking confidence and competence of undergraduate students, an initial informal interview was conducted with a group of EFL university students on the factors expected to enhance their speaking skills. Development of confidence and occasions to speak were among the key responses

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from the pilot study. These initial responses together with studies on how to enhance the development of speaking confidence, fluency, and accuracy were used as a basis for the course design. To gain more benefit from the course, the research was designed considering the regular speaking principles and activities for the course entitled, 'Listening and Speaking for Special Communication'. The action research ideas as stated by Koshy (2005) were found pedagogically useful for speaking development in the regular classroom.

A task-based learning approach (Nunan, 2006) was employed for the findings of the two main research questions conducted with the course participants: 1) What factors help EFL learners to improve/develop their speaking skills?, and 2) What are EFL learners' strengths and weaknesses in speaking English for special communication?

It was expected that the outcome of the study would directly enhance the development of the participants' speaking performance and also provide more insight for teachers into alternative activities to develop speaking skills for EFL learners either in Thai or other EFL/ESL contexts.

## **2. Literature review**

The literature review covered three main aspects: significance of speaking and related research, strengths and weaknesses of speaking for EFL speakers, and a task-based learning approach.

### *2.1. Significance of speaking and related research*

While reading and listening are considered to be the two receptive skills in language learning and use, writing and speaking are the other two productive skills necessary to be integrated in the development of effective communication. Of all the four macro English skills, speaking seems to be the most important skill required for communication (Zaremba, 2006). Effective communication by means of speaking usually creates a number of benefits for both speakers and business organizations. For example, effective speaking skills result in achievements during ceremonial speaking activities, job training activities, job interviews, and many other business purposes (Osborn, Osborn, & Osborn, 2008). Zaremba (2006) also pointed out a study indicating that speaking skills or communication skills were usually placed ahead of work experience, motivation, and academic credentials as criteria for new recruitment for employment. Students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) usually have limited opportunities to speak English outside the classroom (Zhang, 2009) and also limited exposure to English speakers or members of the international community. This might be one reason for teachers to provide more situations and activities for students to strengthen their speaking competence.

Speaking for special communication usually occurs in contexts where speaking performance is conducted for an audience in differing circumstances. The principles of public speaking are also intertwined with the development of speaking for special communication. When a speech involving an audience is taken into consideration, the act of speaking is considered to be more complicated than general everyday conversation and a number of other skills are therefore included in the speaking delivery process, e.g. choosing topics, organizing thoughts, tailoring the message, and adapting to listener feedback (Lucas, 2001).

### *2.2. Strengths and weaknesses of speaking for EFL speakers*

There are a number of factors relating to speaking skills to be considered for effective English speaking performance. Pronunciation, vocabulary, and collocations are singled out as important factors to be emphasized in building fluency for EFL speakers. Providing students with a variety of situations and frequent speaking tasks plays a significant role in the improvement of students' fluency when speaking (Tam, 1997).

Confidence and competence usually lead to strengths of English speaking skills. Patil (2008) asserted that building up the learner's confidence to eliminate fear of making errors was a priority that the teacher should consider in order to make the learner feel comfortable with their language use. Confidence and competence in speaking could be developed from appropriate syllabus design, methods of teaching, and sufficient tasks and materials (Bailey, 2005; Songsiri, 2007). For effectiveness of speaking, Shumin (1997) pointed out a number of elements involved, including listening skills, sociocultural factors, affective factors, and other linguistic and sociolinguistic competence such as grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. In order to convey meaning, EFL learners must have an understanding of words and sentences; that is, they must understand

how words are segmented into various sounds, and how sentences are stressed in particular ways. This grammatical competence enables speakers to use and understand English language structures accurately and unhesitatingly, which contributes to their fluency, which, in turn, develops confidence in speaking.

### 2.3. A task-based learning approach

A task-based pedagogical approach (Nunan, 2006), together with the course description (Faculty of Arts, 2004) was employed to design the speaking activities, of which the emphasis was on the following principles: a needs-based approach to content selection, a provision of opportunities to use English, an enhancement of the learner's experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and the linking of speaking situations to real world English.

## 3. Research methodology

The methodology of the research procedure included three major sections: research framework, subjects and research instruments, and data collection and analysis.

### 3.1 Research framework

In order to gain an insight into the basis of the study, the research framework is displayed in Figure 1.

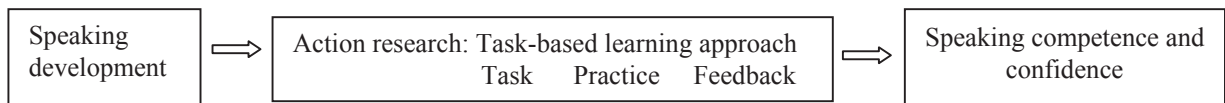


Figure 1. Research framework

### 3.2 Subjects and research instruments

The subjects of the study were 18 course participants of the course entitled, ‘Listening and Speaking for Special Communication’. They enrolled on this elective course for English majors and minors in the curriculum of a Bachelor of Arts degree in the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Thailand. The two main types of research instrument used to acquire data for the findings of the study were as follows:

#### 3.2.1 Two structured interview questions

In order to find answers to the first research question – What factors help EFL learners to improve/develop their speaking skills? – two interview questions were used: 1) What factors helped you to develop your speaking for special communication?, and 2) What suggestions would you make for the improvement of Thai EFL students’ speaking competence?

#### 3.2.2 Recordings of the participants’ speaking performance

One of the speaking tasks was selected to be recorded and analyzed because the information in the task was considered to be particularly useful in the search for answers to the second research question – What are EFL learners’ strengths and weaknesses in speaking English for special communication?

#### 3.2.3 Data collection and analysis

The data was collected during the 15 weeks of the course. ‘Strength and weakness’ sheets were used to record the participants’ speaking performance in every task, which covered comments from classmates and the instructor. Then the participants were invited to answer the interview questions relating to factors enhancing the development of their speaking, which became the findings for the first research question. For the answers to the second research

question, recordings of one speaking task were analyzed, focusing on speaking content, pronunciation, and language use.

#### 4. Findings and discussions

The major findings were presented based on the two research questions. Other additional qualitative findings were also documented. Discussions on each aspect were summarized together with the findings.

##### 4.1 Factors enhancing the development of EFL students' speaking skills

The findings in this section were derived from interviews conducted with the course participants. Building up confidence in speaking to an audience was mainly reported as a factor that strengthened speaking performance. The tasks based on speaking for special communication in a variety of situations designed into the course also helped participants to prepare for speaking, and once each speaking task was well-prepared, this preparation became an effective strategy to minimize anxiety, and thus maximize speaking confidence. When speaking English in an EFL context was taken into consideration, it was not surprising that the study revealed that confidence played an important role. Promoting speaking confidence, together with appropriate task design, was recommended for the English skills development of EFL/ESL learners (Bailey, 2005; Nunan, 2006; Patil, 2008; Trent, 2009; Zhang, 2009). Other out-of-class factors that enhanced participants' speaking included frequent listening to English materials, such as listening to music, watching movies, listening to the radio, watching television programs, and accessing multimedia websites. Previous studies supported the finding that speaking and listening skills were usually intertwined in terms of language learning and development (Noon-ura, 2008). In addition, suggestions for EFL learners' speaking improvement included a variety of course activities, encouragement for more exposure to listening through media, and seeking opportunities to speak in real situations. Moreover, practice and exposure to both listening and speaking activities in real world situations appeared to be a practical method to promote speaking confidence (Songsiri, 2007). Examples of the verbatim reported factors are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors enhancing speaking development

| Participants | Factors   |
|--------------|---|
| No. 1        | Confidence should be developed first; more confidence very important to make students gain confidence to speak.             |
| No. 2        | I love to watch foreign movies. Listen to songs – help pronunciation; confidence is the most important in speaking English. |
| No. 3        | The course helps me to be confident, listening to more news, songs and TV programs.   |

##### 4.2 Strengths and weaknesses of speaking performance

The findings in this section were obtained from the recordings of one speaking task and the information was categorized in terms of content, pronunciation, and language use. Strengths of speaking performance found in this study included a wide variety of real world topics, when a broad range of vocabulary was employed; however, weaknesses were found in the pronunciation and grammatical structure of the sentences. Errors of word stress and the final sounds of some English words were categorized as weaknesses in this study. Another weakness was the use of incorrect tenses. The study found that freedom of topic selection encouraged the participants to feel comfortable and motivated to speak, and definitely maximized speaking confidence. The wide range of vocabulary relating to the selected topics automatically increased and activated the EFL learners' English lexicon. The pronunciation, especially word stress, final sounds such as /z/ and /s/, and grammatical structure seemed to be common weaknesses in Thai students' English performance (Wei & Zhou, 2002). However, feedback and comments from the participants and instructor of the course played an important role in raising awareness, which eventually led to English speaking improvement. Examples of strengths and weaknesses are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Speaking strengths and weaknesses

| Strengths                  | Examples   | Weaknesses            | Examples   |
|----------------------------|--|-----------------------|--|
| Creativity of topics       | A speaker's role as the Asian first-lady of the 55 <sup>th</sup> US President, a museum tour guide and curator, a flight attendant, a golf trainer, an emcee of TV programs, a PR of a business organization, etc. | Pronunciation         | Word stress: errors encourage, faculty, etc.<br>Final sounds: no final sound, such as /z/ in always, themselves, confuse and /s/ in arts, students, etc. |
| A wide range of vocabulary | Particular words related to the topics such as curator, apprentice, commencement day, comprehensive, etc.  | Grammatical structure | Errors found in the use of the past tense when talking about the past events: 'I <u>graduate</u> from this faculty in 1999.'                             |

## 5. Conclusion and implications

This action research was qualitatively conducted to investigate the factors enhancing the development of speaking skills of Thai EFL undergraduate students. A confidence factor was gradually developed during the 15 weeks of a regular listening and speaking course. A task-based pedagogical design provided opportunities for the course participants to speak in different situations, which helped to make 'passive' vocabulary 'active' and also expanded the English lexicon derived from varied speaking topics. Creativity of topics was considered to be a speaking strength, and errors in pronunciation and grammatical structure were categorized as weaknesses of the research findings. Suggestions for speaking improvement for EFL learners mainly covered listening skills, which included listening to music, watching movies, and frequent practice of listening and speaking skills from multimedia websites. The task-based learning design in this qualitative action research could be applied to promote a particular skill or integrated-skill pedagogy in EFL/ESL and other language learning contexts.

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