

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING SPEAKING IN WATNAMOM SCHOOL, THAILAND

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the factors that lead to students' difficulties in learning to speak English at Watnamom School and to identify the types of challenges they face in improving their speaking skills. A mixed-method approach was used, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with students and teachers. The findings reveal that students struggle with confidence issues, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of exposure to English-speaking environments. Additionally, linguistic barriers, such as vocabulary limitations and pronunciation difficulties, further hinder their progress. Instructional challenges, including teacher-centered methods and limited speaking practice, also contribute to their struggles. Environmental factors, such as minimal opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, further exacerbate the issue. These results suggest that a more interactive and supportive learning environment, incorporating group discussions, role-plays, and real-world speaking opportunities, is essential to help students develop their English-speaking skills. Addressing these challenges can enhance students' confidence and fluency, preparing them for both academic and professional success.

Keywords: English Speaking Skills; Language Learning Challenges; Students' Difficulties; Thailand

INTRODUCTION

In language, there four skills that should be mastered by sudents. These skills include listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. Out of these four language skills, Speaking is a skill that appears to reflect students' ability to communicate effectively in English (Gumartifa & Syahri, 2021). Others put in the effort to study speaking since it is thought to play a big part in communication, and they want to be able to interact with others in the global society (Parupalli, 2019). According to Perez, Carreiras, and Duñabeitia (2017) as cited in Azkiah (2024), speaking is an interactive process that involves creating meaning through the production, reception, and processing of information. This means that effective speaking requires not only the ability to communicate clearly but also proficiency in language processing and an understanding of linguistic elements (Harmer, 2007).

English in Thailand is categorized as a foreign language within Kachru's Expanding Circle framework (Pechapan-Hammond, 2020). Its significance is recognized for economic development and global integration (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). However, English usage among the Thai population is low (Ulla, 2018), with limited exposure outside academic settings

hindering students' practice in real-life contexts. Consequently, English instruction occurs in a non-dominant language environment, complicating language acquisition (Khamkhien, 2010). Furthermore, English is not used as a medium of instruction in schools, exacerbating challenges in comprehension and communication for many Thai students. This situation highlights the need for research into the specific factors contributing to these challenges and the obstacles students face in improving their English speaking skills, as numerous studies have identified common difficulties in mastering speaking abilities.

Sharma (2024) and Yessenbekova (2024) identified four main challenges faced by learners: limited English proficiency, psychological barriers, environmental factors, and inadequate instructional methods. In addition to linguistic and psychological issues, the lack of an English-speaking environment significantly hinders the development of speaking skills. Non-native speakers often have few opportunities for authentic communication, limiting their practice. Previous studies have highlighted various obstacles in learning English as a foreign language, such as difficulties in acquiring speaking abilities and limited exposure to English in the country. However, a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to these challenges in specific contexts is lacking (Khamkhien, 2010; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Additional research indicates that students encounter numerous difficulties when speaking English, especially during self-introductions, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, confusion over word order, and a pervasive fear of speaking, which undermines their confidence and increases anxiety (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2021). Sari et al. (2023) identified key factors affecting students' English speaking struggles, such as inhibition, lack of ideas, minimal participation, and reliance on their native language. Han et al. (2023) further noted that low self-confidence, anxiety about making mistakes, and the need for an immersive environment and appropriate vocabulary hinder students' development of English speaking proficiency. Nonetheless, many students still face challenges in achieving fluency in spoken English.

At Watnamom School, this challenge is seen in students' low participation in English conversation. The author once taught there as a part of teaching practice and the author saw that the students there lack vocabulary, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes in speaking. Because of those reasons the author chose to study this research. This research contributes new insights by investigating the unique challenges faced by students at Watnamom School in developing their English-speaking skills. It seeks to identify both the underlying factors causing these challenges and the specific barriers students encounter, which have not been explored in detail within this particular setting. By focusing on Watnamom School, Thailand, the study provides a localized perspective, which is essential for designing tailored interventions to improve English-speaking proficiency among Thai students.

To address these issues, this research aims to explore the following questions: What underlying factors lead to the difficulties students encounter in learning to speak English at Watnamom School? Additionally, what types of challenges do students at Watnamom School experience when trying to improve their English-speaking skills?

METHOD

This research utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach as described by Clark & Creswell (2011, p. 2014), through an online survey and in-depth interviews. The scope or research objects in this study are teachers and students at Watnamom School. Data collection tools and instruments include a closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview guidelines. The questionnaire consisted of questions using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), while the interview guide was designed to explore students' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of speaking learning. Data analysis techniques were quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data from the survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify common patterns, while qualitative data from the interviews were thematically analyzed to explore key themes related to the challenges of learning to speak.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Data

Students' perceptions were viewed through three elements; affective, behavioral and cognitive. The results indicate varying levels of agreement among respondents regarding their attitudes toward speaking English.

Table 2. Questionnaires Data

Statements	Mean \bar{x}	SD
Q1 I like speaking subject	4,0	1,1
Q2 Speaking English to other people makes me happy	4,7	0,8
Q3 Speaking English gives me opportunities to listen to other people and at the same time I learn English and moral values	4,0	1,3
Q4 Speaking English creates a lively and enjoyable classrooms atmosphere	3,3	0,8
Q5 I am confident that I can speak English through dialogue very well	2,8	2,0
Q6 Speaking English arouses my motivation and learning interest	4,2	1,2
Q7 Speaking for Academic Purposes is important subject to learn	3,5	0,8
Q8 I will not need much speaking English when I get out of college	3,2	1,7
Q9 I need Speaking English for my future career	3,7	1,2

Q10 Speaking English to other people arouses my inspiration	4,3	1,0
Q11 Speaking is one of my worst subject	2,2	1,5
Q12 Speaking to other people is difficult for me	2,8	1,5
Q13 I got good grade in speaking for academic purposes	3,3	1,5
Q14 Speaking English to other people can improve my vocabulary	4,2	1,0
Q15 Speaking English to other people can improve my grammar	3,7	1,4

From the table 2, the students generally have a positive attitude toward speaking English, recognizing its benefits in academic and personal contexts. Many students enjoy speaking subjects (M = 4.0) and feel happy when speaking English (M = 4.7). They also believe that speaking English enhances their vocabulary (M = 4.2) and grammar (M = 3.7), while also increasing motivation (M = 4.2) and inspiration (M = 4.3). These findings indicate that students see the value of speaking English, aligning with qualitative data where students expressed enthusiasm for learning the language. However, despite recognizing the importance of English, students have mixed views on its relevance beyond academic settings. While they acknowledge its significance for academic success (M = 3.5) and career advancement (M = 3.7), they are uncertain about its long-term usefulness after college (M = 3.2).

One of the primary difficulties that students experience is a deficiency in self-assurance regarding their English-speaking abilities. Many report feeling unconfident in dialogue (M = 2.8), find speaking English difficult (M = 2.8), and even consider speaking their weakest subject (M = 2.2). The qualitative data supports these findings, highlighting fear of making mistakes, embarrassment over pronunciation, and hesitation to speak in front of peers. Teachers also emphasized that Thai students tend to refrain from speaking English due to fear of criticism. These psychological barriers significantly impact students' willingness to engage in speaking activities, limiting their overall progress. The development of English speaking skills among students is frequently hindered by fear and anxiety, which lead them to refrain from speaking out of concern for potential criticism, unfavorable assessments, and ridicule from both peers and teachers (Nazara, 2011; Sultana & Jamin, 2021).

Classroom engagement levels suggest that while students see the benefits of speaking English, they do not always actively participate in speaking activities. The data indicates that students believe speaking English contributes to a lively and enjoyable classroom atmosphere (M = 3.3), yet their engagement is not particularly strong.

Qualitative Data

1. Underlying Factors Leading to Difficulties in Learning to Speak English

The qualitative findings reveal a multifaceted set of challenges that impede students at Watnamom School from achieving proficiency in English speaking skills. These challenges,

stemming from linguistic, psychological, instructional, and environmental factors (Efrizah et al., 2024; Octaberlina et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2024), align with those identified in the broader literature on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning (Brown, 2007; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach. Teachers observed that students mostly use Thai to communicate, even in school. While a student 1, remarked, “I only speak English when studying with my teacher or meeting foreigners.”

Psychological barriers, such as fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence, also contribute to the difficulties. Both teachers and students highlighted this issue, with teacher 2 stating, “Most Thais have a good understanding of English, but they don’t dare to communicate because they fear being criticized.” Students expressed similar concerns, with student 2 saying, “I feel shy when I try to speak English because people laugh at me.”

Similarly, unfamiliarity with English vocabulary and pronunciation further complicates students' ability to speak English effectively. Teachers mentioned that “students are still unfamiliar with English vocabulary, and different accents make it harder for them to learn.” Students also admitted difficulties, saying, “I’m not good at pronunciation, and spelling is hard.”

The broader social setting does not prioritize English communication, which limits students' ability to practice. A lack of an English-supportive environment means students rarely get the chance to engage with the language outside the classroom. As teacher 1 pointed out, “100% of students interact with friends in Thai, so they rarely practice English.” Students also noted that their family members and social circles primarily use Thai, further reducing opportunities to practice English.

A significant barrier identified in the findings is the lack of opportunities for real-world practice, a concern echoed in Krashen’s (1985) input hypothesis, which emphasizes the need for meaningful interaction to develop language proficiency. The predominance of Thai in students' daily interactions limits their exposure to English, both in and outside the classroom. This lack of immersion hinders the development of confidence and fluency, as students cannot regularly apply their knowledge in authentic communicative contexts. To address this, schools could implement immersive language programs or create English-speaking zones within the school environment. Encouraging extracurricular activities, such as English clubs or conversation partners, could also provide students with valuable practice opportunities.

2. Types of Challenges Faced by Students in Improving English Speaking Skills

The qualitative findings reveal a multifaceted set of challenges that impede students at Watnamom School from achieving proficiency in English speaking skills. These challenges, stemming from linguistic, psychological, instructional, and environmental factors, align with those identified in the broader literature on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning

(Brown, 2007; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach.

Linguistic Challenges

One of the main linguistic difficulties lies in vocabulary and grammar. Many students struggle to remember and use appropriate words during communication. For example, a student 3 admitted, “My vocabulary is still very limited, and it’s hard to remember words in English.” Teachers also observed that students are often stuck at the vocabulary stage, which hinders their ability to construct meaningful sentences.

Pronunciation is another key challenge, as the differences between English and Thai sounds create confusion. A teacher 1 explained, “There are some spellings in Thai that are different from English, making it hard for students to familiarize themselves with English pronunciation.” These linguistic barriers prevent students from developing fluency and confidence when speaking English. Linguistic difficulties, particularly limited vocabulary and challenges with pronunciation, further impede students’ speaking abilities. The differences between Thai and English phonological systems create additional hurdles, as noted by Khamkhien (2010). These linguistic gaps often leave students unable to construct sentences or communicate effectively. Addressing these issues requires targeted vocabulary-building exercises and pronunciation practice. Integrating technology, such as language apps or online resources, can provide students with interactive tools to improve their pronunciation and expand their vocabulary. Teachers can also incorporate phonetics lessons to help students become familiar with English sounds.

Psychological Challenges

In addition to linguistic hurdles, psychological factors such as fear and embarrassment discourage students from speaking English. Many feel insecure about their pronunciation and worry about being criticized by others. Student 4 shared, “I feel embarrassed because my accent is not correct,” highlighting how this lack of confidence leads to avoidance of speaking opportunities.

Shyness is another recurring issue that affects students’ willingness to engage in conversations. For instance, a student 3 mentioned, “I feel shy when I try to speak English in front of friends.” These psychological barriers not only limit participation in class but also reduce opportunities for real-life communication.

Additionally, this problem may stem from a lack of exposure to real-world English-speaking environments, as indicated by qualitative data showing that students rarely use English outside the classroom. Many students reported speaking English only during lessons or when interacting with foreigners, which suggests that their understanding of its practical applications remains limited. The lack of practice in speaking English is a significant obstacle for many students,

leading to reluctance and low confidence due to limited exposure to native speakers, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient real-world communication opportunities, which are further exacerbated by classroom time constraints and the absence of English-speaking environments outside formal lessons (Lubis et al., 2024; Nur et al, 2017; Phan Kim, 2023).

Psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and shyness are significant obstacles to speaking English. These issues resonate with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) findings on foreign language classroom anxiety. The fear of criticism or ridicule discourages students from participating in speaking activities, further limiting their opportunities to improve. To overcome these barriers, fostering a supportive and nonjudgmental classroom environment is essential. Teachers can use positive reinforcement and celebrate students' attempts to communicate, regardless of accuracy. Encouraging collaborative tasks and peer support can also help reduce anxiety and build confidence among learners.

Instructional Challenges

The teaching methods employed in the classroom also contribute to students' struggles. Lessons are often heavily focused on reading, spelling, and grammar, with little emphasis on speaking practice. A student 5 noted, "The teacher teaches vowels and vocabulary but doesn't focus much on speaking." This imbalance in teaching methods limits students' ability to develop conversational skills.

The teacher-centered approach prevalent at Watnamom School prioritizes grammar, spelling, and memorization over conversational skills. This finding is consistent with Wiriyaichitra's (2002) observation that traditional teaching methods in Thailand often neglect communicative language teaching (CLT). The departure of a native-speaking teacher further diminished interactive and practical learning opportunities, leaving students with fewer chances to develop speaking confidence. Adopting CLT methods, as suggested by Richards and Rodgers (2001), could help shift the focus toward real-life communication. Role-plays, group discussions, and problem-solving tasks can create a more engaging and interactive classroom environment. Additionally, professional development for teachers is crucial to equip them with the skills to implement these methods effectively (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Moreover, the lack of consistency in teaching approaches exacerbates the problem. After the departure of a native-speaking teacher, students felt that their opportunities for interactive and practical learning diminished. This shift has made speaking lessons less engaging and effective.

Environmental Challenges

The surrounding environment plays a crucial role in language learning, yet students at Watnamom School lack an English-supportive environment. At home and in their communities, students rarely encounter opportunities to practice English. A teacher 1 observed, "The lack of

support from the surrounding environment—parents, friends, and the community—leaves students unmotivated to learn English”. The lack of an English-supportive environment at home and in the community exacerbates the challenges faced by students. This aligns with Krashen’s (1985) assertion that a rich language environment is critical for language acquisition.

Additionally, limited interaction with native speakers further restricts students’ exposure to authentic English communication. A teacher 1 suggested, “Recruiting foreign teachers could help students practice speaking English in real-life contexts”. The absence of interaction with native speakers further limits students’ exposure to authentic English communication. To mitigate this, schools could collaborate with local or international organizations to recruit foreign teachers or facilitate cultural exchange programs. Virtual exchanges with students from English-speaking countries can also provide valuable exposure to native English usage.

These challenges underscore the complexity of improving English-speaking skills among students at Watnamom School. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that combines effective teaching methods, psychological support, and a more conducive learning environment to create meaningful opportunities for students to practice and develop their speaking abilities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, students at Watnamom School generally have a positive attitude toward speaking English and recognize its benefits in academic and personal contexts. However, despite their enthusiasm, various challenges hinder their ability to develop strong speaking skills. Confidence issues, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of real-world exposure to English contribute to their struggles. Additionally, traditional teaching methods that emphasize grammar and memorization over conversation limit opportunities for speaking practice. Linguistic challenges, such as vocabulary retention and pronunciation difficulties, further complicate the learning process.

To address these issues, a more interactive and supportive learning environment is essential. Implementing engaging activities such as role-plays, group discussions, and pronunciation exercises can help students build confidence and improve their speaking abilities. Additionally, providing more real-world speaking opportunities, such as interactions with native speakers and extracurricular English programs, can enhance their practical language skills. Creating an English-supportive environment at school and encouraging practice beyond the classroom can also contribute to long-term improvement.

Ultimately, while students appreciate the value of learning to speak English, overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes effective teaching strategies, psychological support, and increased exposure to real-life communication. By addressing these

factors, students can develop greater fluency and confidence in using English, preparing them for both academic and professional success.

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