



Teaching English Speaking and English Speaking Tests in the Thai Context: A Reflection from Thai Perspective

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Abstract

To successfully assess how language learners enhance their performance and achieve language learning goals, the four macro skills of listening, speaking reading and writing are usually the most frequently assessed and focused areas. However, speaking, as a productive skill, seems intuitively the most important of all the four language skills because it can distinctly show the correctness and language errors that a language learner makes. Since English speaking tests, in general, aim to evaluate how the learners express their improvement and success in pronunciation and communication, several aspects, especially speaking test formats and pronunciation need to be considered. To enhance Thai learners' English performance and the quality of the speaking tests, this paper has three principal objectives. First, this paper presents English language teaching, as well as teaching English speaking in the Thai context. Then, it highlights the significance of the test format as it is the main tool and indicator for scoring performance and analytic rating methods. Lastly, the paper addresses major problems found in the speaking tests to elucidate certain facts about learners' speaking ability and English instruction in the Thai context. Some pedagogical implications of the study are discussed for learning and teaching speaking to second or foreign language learners.

Keywords: English speaking ability, Thai learners, Teaching speaking skills

1. Introduction

In the world of globalization era, English has increasingly become the medium in every domain of communication, both in local and global contexts. As a result, the demand for speakers using English effectively is necessary in every country. Teaching and learning English, except for the native language, is thus crucial for communicative purposes to meet the demands of global economics and to cope with the growing local, national and international demands for English skills.

In Thailand, English is considered a foreign language, and is used for the purposes of academic advancement, career advancement, and traveling abroad. To cope with the growing local and international demand, a number of efforts from all parties involved have been made to the Thai educational system to help boost Thai learners' English performance. However, the National survey conducted by the Office of Educational Testing of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, the Ministry of Education during the years of 1997 and 1998, showed that Thai learners, being assessed against standardized benchmarks of achievement, had unsatisfactory proficiency in the four skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking (Wiriyaichitra, 2001). This result was repeatedly substantiated by more recent studies (e.g., Bolton, 2008; Bunnag, 2005a, 2005b), indicating that, based on the scores of two international standardized tests: TOEFL and TOEIC, Thai test takers' scores were significantly low, compared to those of Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, a focus on the development of literacy skills in English among Thai learners is central to language pedagogy.

Of all four key language skills, speaking is deemed to be the most important in learning a second or foreign language. As stated by Ur (1996), speaking included all other skills of knowing that language. In Thailand, the speaking skill is a critical part of language learning and the teaching process. In other words, it is extremely difficult for Thai learners to master the English language in terms of speaking and listening. This is because the medium of instruction in the classroom is mostly Thai, as many teachers teaching English to Thai learners are mainly non-native speakers, leading to the use of unnatural language and creating the failure of genuine interaction in the language classroom. Also, Thai learners in general have few chances to interact with English native speakers. The exposure to English of Thai learners is thus somewhat limited. That is why a lot of popular programs and foreign language teaching methods try to replicate the target language environment through immersion programs, bilingual school curricula, and computer-assisted teaching (Lapkin et al., 1990). However, the fact that many non-native speakers use the rating criteria based on native speakers' standards to measure learners' oral proficiency, according to Kim (2005), using this benchmark is not appropriate for the actual use of English in an international context. Therefore, it is

important for teachers and educators in general, and test designers in particular, to reconsider the purposes of English speaking tests, and the standards of assessing learners' speaking skills. Since a number of factors are responsible for limited success to speaking competence, this paper specifically aims to present teaching English speaking in the Thai context, and to explore the roles of speaking test formats and major problems of Thai learners found in speaking tests.

2. English Language Teaching in Thailand

To meet the demands of global economics, the Thai government has launched new initiatives in all domains of the educational system, including curriculum development, materials, and teaching and learning facilities, throughout the history of ELT in Thailand (Wongsothorn et al., 2003). To begin with, in 1895, English language was assigned to be studied as an optional subject taught in secondary schools. The major change occurred in 1909 when English was assigned to be studied in primary schools. Later in 1921, English became a compulsory subject for students beyond Grade 4. Aksornkul (1980) pointed out that the objectives of this change were twofold: to produce modern thinkers for the country, and to provide students with sufficient knowledge of English to be able to function in classroom.

There was a great change in the English syllabus for secondary schools in 1960. That is, English language was stated in the Upper Elementary Education Curriculum to be compulsory subject at the upper elementary level. Another major change was witnessed in the 1978 curriculum, which classified the English subject as optional again, and the subject was grouped together with Work Oriented Experience Area in the Special Experience Group. As for 1980 national curriculum, the English subject was classified as an elective in primary schools and compulsory subject from Grade 7 or in secondary schools.

Then, the revised English language curriculum was introduced in 1996. According to Khamkhien (2006), although English was still an elective in primary schools, the Thai government pushed a substantial effort, for every government school, to start learning English at Grade 1 onwards because there was a gap in terms of English standard between students studying English in private schools and those from government schools. The purpose of this revised proficiency-based curriculum was to provide students with the opportunity to continue their English education without interruption and to facilitate life-long learning. At this stage, the emphasis was placed on the development of the students' language proficiency to fulfill a number of purposes: communication, acquisition of knowledge, use of English in socio-cultural functions, career advancement, etc. In terms of approach to language teaching, functional-communicative approach with an eclectic orientation was focused.

The current English curriculum was revised and introduced in 2001 when the Ministry of Education introduced the national foreign language standard and benchmarks (Foley, 2005). The motivation for this revision was to be consistent with the changing world and globalization. With this change, the 2001 system integrated primary and secondary into a single stream, which was divided into four sub-levels: the Preparatory Level (Grades 1-3); the Beginning Level (Grades 4-6); the Expanding Level: (Grades 7-9); and Progressive Level (Grades 10-12). At this point, Foley (2005) asserted that an emphasis of this current English curriculum was placed on learner-centered culture and life-long learning through cognitive, emotional, affective, ethical, and cultural growths within the Thai context.

At the university level, both public and private Thai universities reformed English language curriculum in order to meet the demand for English language skills in the workplace. According to Foley (2005), English is now required for twelve credits instead of six in university education, namely, six in general English and the other six in English for academic or specific purposes. Moreover, Wongsothorn, Hiranburana and Chinnawongs (2003) reveal that the English curriculum in Thailand can be viewed as a paradigm shift from English as an elective to English as a compulsory subject, emphasizing independent work, autonomous learning, innovations and new technology in English language teaching (ELT), such as self-access learning, performance standards of general English as well as English for academic and specific purposes.

3. Teaching English Speaking in the Thai Context

Although substantial efforts have been made to the reform of English language curriculum in Thailand, Thai learners' English performance, as mentioned earlier, does not meet the standard required. In this regard, as pointed out by Foley (2005), factors responsible for limited success of ELT in Thailand include lack of proper curricula, dry teaching styles that overly focused on grammatical details, students, learning media, inappropriate texts, and testing and evaluation. Among all these factors, with regard to the aim of this paper which focuses on improving speaking skills of Thai learners of English, selecting appropriate teaching approaches and methods deserves our attention.

Since English in Thailand is taught as a foreign language, the exposure to English language is somewhat limited. As such, English instruction is located in an area where English is not a primary language. Moreover, the majority of English teachers are Thai in all levels of education—who are largely unqualified as teachers (Yunibandhu, 2004). As for teaching methodologies employed in the language classroom, traditionally, Thai EFL teachers employed the Grammar-Translation and Audiolingual methods in English classroom. Then, these two approaches were changed to correspond with the academic purposes and national educational reform as mentioned above along the history of

language teaching in Thailand. In this case, educators and language teachers have sought and experimented with several teaching approaches to help learners learn language effectively such as task-based instruction, content-based approach and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). In this regard, it seems that, in the teachers, educators, curriculum planners' perspectives, CLT is preferable and might be effective teaching approach as evidenced by a number of studies conducted in the Western countries (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Fotos, 2002; Saengboon, 2004; Snow, 2005).

Specifically with an English teaching approach, recently CLT has been promoted to meet curriculum reforms, revising teaching materials and improving teaching facilities for the attainment of communicative goals. However, in Thailand it is deemed that CLT often fails to create sufficient opportunities for genuine interaction in the language classroom. This is because most of the Thai teachers are not familiar with the aural-oral method of CLT. They would emphasize grammatical competence and provide learners with pattern drills and rote memorization of isolated sentences, creating incorrect language forms and limiting authentic speaking activities (Saengboon, 2004). Interaction in the language classroom is mostly teacher-dominated, and learners are called upon primarily to provide factual responses, which is not genuine and authentic. This critical issue is witnessed by the study conducted by Bilasha and Kwangsawad (2004), illustrating that the teachers did not understand how to design speaking activities during practice and production. Further, the teachers had difficulty in selecting materials and activities that would match the learners' speaking ability and content (Kanoksilapatham, 2007). The findings of these studies suggest that, to help Thai EFL teachers successfully adopt CLT in their classroom, they must understand CLT which requires a number of key supports in order to succeed at implementing communicative activities in their classrooms, and requires time to prepare materials for interactive activities. Moreover, they should be able to connect the topics in the materials to what learners have already known in terms of their language skills, personal lives, and real world situations. Therefore, it can be said that up to now English language teaching using CLT in Thailand has not prepared Thai learners for the changing world. The idea that teachers should improve teaching competence, including testing and evaluation by promoting the communication approach needs to be revised. In other words, Thai teachers should take responsibility for anticipating their problems and devising strategies to help their learners.

4. Significance of Speaking Test Formats

As mentioned earlier, CLT is deemed to be a supportive teaching approach with regard to teaching speaking to achieve communicative goals. However, apart from the significance of selecting teaching approach in teaching English, this paper would not be complete without mentioning the choice of appropriate evaluation to meet the purposes of the teaching approach. In this regard, test formats are focused as teaching can have an influence on learning and testing or washback-- the effects of testing on teaching and learning (Bailey, 2005). The following cases describe some of the speaking test formats which can be observed in Thailand.

What is wrong with the speaking test formats that most Thai teachers use for measuring the speaking ability of their learners? Often times in Thailand, at a university level, speaking tests are included in language courses, especially in foundation courses. At this point, first, teachers themselves will determine test formats whether interviewing individuals or using situation-based settings is appropriate based on the focused content learners learned throughout the semester. As for the interviews, a wide variety of short written texts listed on a piece of paper is provided. Then, the learners need to speak out loud and answer some questions concerning the issue covered in the text. In addition, they will be interviewed, asking a series of questions, probably about general or current issues or contents they learned in class.

Another speaking test format in need of consideration is that, at some institutes the learners will be divided into groups of two or three for the speaking tests. Then they will randomly select or draw a topic provided by their classroom teachers. These topics are somewhat related to the contents or situations they learned from the class. About five to ten minutes are allocated for planning and preparing a dialogue concerning such a topic they randomly selected, and then they are required to perform their dialogue and act out to the teachers.

The other case of speaking test formats frequently used in Thailand is that teachers will provide learners with written slips including both instruction and language function requesting, ordering and asking for options that learners have to follow and speak out in order to ask their counterpart. However, these instructions describing what the learners have to speak are provided in Thai, and thus they have to intuitively and simultaneously translate all the instructions and create their own sentences based on those language functions into English for their friends. At this juncture, the slips used in the advanced course for learners will provide instructions and language functions in English, aiming the learners to elaborate their answer to facilitate understanding for their peers, and to keep conversations going on.

Based on the above mentioned, an eminent question emerges: how does the test format affect the results of the test? Several factors are responsible for the success and failure, particularly the written slips used in the tests. What is wrong with the above case of the test formats? Yes, all of them are practical, facilitating learners' understanding of what they have to do in the test, but other pertinent questions arise:

- *Do the instructions and language functions need to be provided in Thai?*

- *How can the output from the learners be natural or authentic given that they have a chance to prepare before taking the test?*
- *How can the conversation be natural, representing a real interaction since they have enough time to prepare their dialogue?*
- *Does the choice of teaching approach reflect and reinforce the idea of test formats?*

Taken together, teaching and learning English skills in the Thai classroom, at all times, are difficult to manage for a long time due to a number of reasons as previously illustrated. As mentioned earlier, most instructors consider that CLT is the most appropriate approach employed in managing an English classroom. Textbooks are also adopted and used as a mainstream of these courses, providing topics and particular language functions. In this sense, learners will be trained and practice speaking skills with a concentration in linguistic knowledge and language use or pragmatics through English. Therefore, most extracts, examples and contexts are also presented in English when teaching. However, given the slips translated in Thai, another question emerges:

- *Is this practice followed and does it serve the choice of selected language teaching approach?*
- *If the rating criteria used in the test focus on grammar, range of vocabulary, fluency and accuracy, are the choice of instruction and the test formats suitable?*

In this regard, Yang and Xu (2001) stated that, when English is taught as a skill to practice, then the classroom often provides the learner with an artificial environment; the world surrounding the learner is not drawn on for interaction, input, or feedback in the target language. Therefore, it can be said that CLT in Thailand often fails to create sufficient opportunity for genuine interaction in the language classroom.

From the above cases, the test results also revealed that most of the Thai learners have the interference of the first language (L1), Thai, during the tests. A large volume of potential problematic words and meanings lead to misunderstanding and communication breaks down because of inadequate lexical items and the exposure to English in a real situation. In addition, the misconceptions regarding the notion of the relationship between teaching method and evaluation prevail. The subsequent section presents major problems found in the speaking tests.

5. Major Problems Found in the Speaking Tests

This section illustrates how Thai learners' English speaking abilities, particularly in forming questions and giving their responses are illuminated. It also describes the learners' pronunciation as it should be prioritized in the speaking test. Some observations and the effects of mispronunciation such as communication breaks down and the roles of turn-taking are also discussed.

5.1 Pronunciation

Pronunciation is one of major problems claimed to be impeding or contributing to the lack of speaking competence of Thai learners. This is because English has a distinct set of sounds, while Thai does not. To successfully learn another language, particularly to achieve the target-like pronunciation and minimize foreign accents that can result from a negative L1 transfer, learners need to know what sounds are available in the target language but not in their own mother tongue, and vice versa.

As observed from the speaking tests, there are certain aspects that should be taken into consideration. First, although pronunciation is focused and practiced a lot in class during the lesson, a number of learners could not perform on reading aloud. It was found that their articulation was problematic, leading to misunderstanding by the listeners. It seemed that there were a lot of sounds that were difficult for them to pronounce correctly. For example, as was always the case, the letter *h* and *s* are problematic for most Thai learners due to their absence in the Thai language. Therefore, the initial sounds in the words "*think, although, them, and the*" are often mispronounced in the tests. As for the final sound, the word "*How much*" is often pronounced "**How mud*".

Taken together, most of the learners could not pronounce or mispronounce a series of words, resulting in misunderstanding in conversation. As noticed, most of the learners read a paragraph from a slip without understanding the meanings of what they were reading. That is, most of them read word by word without intonation, pauses or stress. Therefore, the knowledge of phonetics is a must and is needed in the instruction at the beginning of the course. Thai teachers should focus on pronunciation or on word level before going beyond communication in English. Moreover, the teachers have to raise learners' awareness and the importance of pronunciation both in word and sentence level in order to avoid communication breaks down or misunderstanding as a result of mispronunciation, inappropriate lexical items, and lack of pragmatic knowledge as conceived by the interlocutor.

5.2 Authentic or Natural Communication

Language, be it spoken or written, is complex, reflecting an interaction and manifestation of linguistic features conveying a message. In conversation, one cannot take the role of speaker or listener at all time. We have to change

our roles or turn-taking (either speaker or listener) in conversation so as to keep communication going on. In other words, the roles of speaker and listener change constantly. The person who speaks first becomes a listener as soon as the person addressed takes his or her turn in the conversation by beginning to speak. Given the fact that all of the instructions and language functions covered in the speaking tests are listed in Thai, and the preparation sheets providing questions in Thai were also distributed to the learners before the test administration, a majority of the learners had a chance to prepare answers to those questions and recited them. During the test, it was observed that the interaction between interlocutors that should be immediately occurred in a real conversation should be prioritized since the learners who answered to the questions tried to think of what they memorized and recited from the preparation sheets before taking the test, rendering a pause in conversation. This could be taken into account by the fact that, although most of the learners passed this part of the examination, they did not understand what they were speaking, and they could not produce new English sentences by themselves in a real situation.

Another intriguing point to concern about turn-taking is that, when the speaker could not raise a question to his or her listener, the listener does not know what the meaning of questions is and when he or she has to answer the questions. How does his or her partner respond or give his or her answer? It seems that it sounds quite unnatural in communication when the speaker reads or interprets incorrectly the instructions appeared on the slips, but his or her friend can correctly give answers since he or she can remember the answers from the preparation sheets. This leads to the question how we, later at that time, control our marking scores fairly and accurately for measurement accountability.

5.3 Communication Breaks Down

Comprehensible inputs play a vital role in language learning, including communication. As can be seen from the speaking tests, there are certain reasons pointing out that comprehensible inputs are major factors which contribute to communication breaks down. First, most of the learners could not read questions to their friends accurately as most of them did not understand the instructions listed on the slips due to their limited English background knowledge and skills. As a result, a communication cannot go on during the test within the time constraint.

In addition, misunderstanding the instructions listed on the slips and mispronunciation of speakers themselves are considered other concrete factors leading to some confusion to clarify such answers and/ or to ask follow-up questions. Consider the following situation, when a speaker mispronounces the words such as “*hate*” instead of “*have*” in the question, “*What kind of food do you hate?*”, and “*leave*” instead of “*live*” in the question, “*Where did you leave?*”, the listener should ask his or her speaker to repeat the original sentence in reality, but did not. Moreover, one interesting thing that can be found in this case is that the speaker will be shy to speak out again as he or she recognizes that there might be mispronunciations during the test.

Lastly, the interlocutor himself could not answer or respond to the questions they were talking about. In this case, one possible reason that can support to this situation is that the interlocutor does not understand what the questions mean. In turn, this situation highlights the importance of listening skills as well because the speaker needs to be aware of and comprehend what he or she intends to speak out or listen to before answering or responding to the interlocutor appropriately. Therefore, these results reflect that, to teach successfully speaking skills, other skills including listening skills should be considered as they are crucial in real communication.

6. Pedagogical Implication

This paper aims to present English teaching in Thailand and to reveal some of insightful evidences from observations of teaching, learning, and assessing speaking competence in the Thai context. As discussed earlier, there are mismatches between teachers’ rating methods and performance, and teaching approach used in the language classroom. The paper also highlights the importance of some major problems found in the English speaking tests, shedding some light onto practical suggestions to improve teaching speaking skills to Thai EFL learners.

First, in terms of teaching approaches, Thai teachers of English might consider, adopt and adapt planned eclectic approaches to teaching (Bax, 2003). If learning a foreign language is learning how to communicate with others, EFL/ESL learning and teaching should be ultimately aimed at establishing meaningful communication in the classroom, and the first requirement towards this end is an affective affirmation of the learners. In this sense, since most of the Thai teachers adopted CLT approach in teaching English, a communicative syllabus should combine all the necessary aspects to cope with the problems found in the speaking tests, reflecting a success or failure of classroom instruction. These aspects, as illustrated by Hinkel (2006), include changing perspectives on the teaching of pronunciation, pragmalinguistic skills (e.g., the emphasis on the impact of social status, social distance, and speech acts such as requests, refusals, compliments, and clarification questions).

Second, as far as the importance of grammatical structures is concerned for language instruction, particularly EFL learners, it is undeniable that learners must be conscious of the structural or grammatical features of the target language; however, this process should enable the learners to associate those features to their functional usage in producing their own language in communication. Moreover, the learners should have the ability to use both forms and functions

properly for establishing meaningful communication. This, as a result, calls for an approach in which teachers working as controllers, facilitators, and/or helpers. These teachers might perform their functions as assessors, adopting various roles and use a wide selection of activities ranging from form-focused tasks to more informal and meaning-focused interactions whereby students are led to converge purposefully and successfully with one another (Luchini, 2004).

In addition, since Thai teachers of English are a resource person in English classroom, the role of these teachers is even more distinct, potentially influencing learners' learning. In this regard, Thai teachers of English themselves should have good foundation knowledge in English, as witnessed by Tarone (2005) demonstrating that when learning speaking skills, learners must simultaneously attend to content, morphosyntax and lexis, discourse and information structuring, and the sound system and prosody, as well as appropriate register and pragmalinguistic features. Therefore, to equip the Thai English teachers with a scholastic knowledge of linguistics for the benefits of developing learners' language skills, as suggested by Kanoksilapatham (2007), the teachers must possess both declarative and procedural knowledge, as well as need to be knowledgeable and well-rounded. The Thai teachers of English, therefore, should continuously attend training programs focusing on the teachers' own linguistic and teaching knowledge.

In terms of testing and evaluation, to assess how learners improve their speaking skills, both proficiency and achievement tests should be focused in the instruction and curriculum. To illustrate, the former indicates the general proficiency of the learners while the latter shows the mastery of the course objectives (Prapphal, 2003). In this case, it is noteworthy that, according to the limited opportunities to expose to English of Thai learners, achievement tests reflecting the real-life performance of the learners are needed. Rating criteria, test scores and performance profiles are also important indicators for teaching accountability.

Furthermore, given the fact that most Thai learners of English might not have ample opportunity to use English on a daily basis, it is crucial for teachers to create an authentic English learning environment which is accessible and available to their learners. Moreover, since the teachers adopt CLT approach in English instruction, they have to consider language assessment and course evaluation focusing on the performance in communication. Also, they should provide the learners with a number of learning facilities and teaching media appropriate to these language learners and learning context.

7. Conclusion

This paper addressed serious problems found in English language teaching in Thailand, specifically in teaching English speaking and English speaking tests. As far as CLT approach is concerned, serious attempts should be made to the instruction both in and outside class in order to cope with the problems we, Thai teachers, are now facing. First, it should be noted that the choice of language methodology should be appropriate and relevant to test format and evaluation, and vice versa. How can we make change or improve our learners' English performance? Teaching and learning in class should not only emphasize on speaking phrases or everyday expression, but also we have to focus on communication in the real situation, including increasing linguistic knowledge (e.g., phonetics, lexical items, pragmatic knowledge, etc.). In addition, the teachers should motivate and encourage the learners to produce new sentences or utterances by themselves in speaking English, pointing out a number of ways that can be employed to survive in real communication (e.g., asking for clarification, using gesture, etc.). However, the scenario in Thailand described above cannot be accomplished without the dedication and collaboration of educators and especially of classroom teachers who need effective language trainings and arrange appropriate provisions of the knowledge of the subject matter.

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