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pportunities for Practicing English: It Is a Matter of Picking Them up การเก็บเกี่ยวโอกาสในการฝึกฝนภาษาอังกฤษ

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บทคัดย่อ

คนไทยมีความยากลำบากกับการพูดภาษาอังกฤษมาโดยตลอด ถึงแม้ว่าในสถาบันต่าง ๆ จะเน้นการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ แต่การฝึกทักษะการพูดก็ยังเป็นปัญหาอยู่เสมอ ในห้องเรียนมีการใช้ บทบาทสมมติและสถานการณ์จำลองเพื่อเพิ่มพูนความสามารถในการพูดให้ผู้เรียน อย่างไรก็ตาม การได้ฝึกในสถานการณ์จริงเป็นสิ่งที่กระตุ้นการเรียนรู้ได้ดีที่สุด ประเทศไทยเป็นประเทศที่ไม่ได้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในชีวิตประจำวัน แต่การหาโอกาสให้ผู้เรียนได้ใช้ความรู้ภาษาอังกฤษที่เรียนมาในสถานการณ์จริงเป็นเรื่องที่ไม่ยากจนเกินไป บทความนี้นำเสนอปัจจัยและการปรับเปลี่ยนเกี่ยวกับการเรียนการสอน ภาษาอังกฤษที่ควรคำนึงถึง รวมทั้งเสนอแนะกิจกรรมและการเตรียมผู้เรียนในการฝึกฝนภาษา โดยใช้ประโยชน์จากอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยว ซึ่งสามารถนำไปปรับใช้ให้เหมาะสมกับบริบทของแต่ละสถาบัน

คำสำคัญ: ทักษะการพูด การท่องเที่ยว การสอนภาษาเพื่อการสื่อสาร ความมั่นใจ

Abstract

Speaking English has always been a major problem for Thais. Though it has been brought into focus in all educational institutions, practicing speaking in class is still often problematic. Role-plays and simulations are created to enhance students' abilities. However, practicing in genuine real-world situations is without equal. Thailand is not an English speaking country but opportunities for practicing English are not too difficult to find. Various activities related to tourism can be designed and assigned to promote both language practice and contribution to the community. Several factors and adjustments are presented for consideration. Activities and preparation are suggested to be practically used to suit each institution's context.

Keywords: Speaking, Tourism, Communicative Language Teaching, Confidence

Introduction

Among language skills we use to communicate, speaking is the most prominent. Speaking English is extremely necessary nowadays, especially when the AEC integration starts in 2015. The workplace is becoming more diverse, linguistically and culturally. Either for working in neighboring countries or finding a job in a competitive job market in Thailand among an influx of foreign candidates, the ability to speak English is a must. All kinds of jobs need more or less speaking skills to communicate with customers, employers, or colleagues, both for professional and social purposes. The need for applicants and current staff to speak effectively is greater than in the past, as Myles (2009) mentioned that oral communication predominates at all levels of workplace activity.

In Thailand, numerous efforts were made during the past three decades to equip students with the ability to speak English.

Communicative language teaching, heavily research- supported and implemented widely in several countries, was adopted with a high hope for success. However, it has not turned out as expected. A more critical question is whether the average ability of Thai students to use English is higher now than that of thirty years ago when students learned the language in a more traditional way. Thai graduates and the workforce generally still have low English proficiency. Witaya Jeradechakul, director of Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Secretariat, mentioned that Thai students' weak points were English and a diligent attitude toward their studies (Khaopa, 2011). This is confirmed by The Ministry of Education, claiming that Thai people have below average English language skills compared to other foreign countries (Chanchokpong, 2012). Moreover, Education First or EF, a renowned language school, revealed that Thai youth are ranked number 42 in English language skills out of 44 surveyed

countries. The ranking puts the country behind other ASEAN countries like Vietnam at number 39, Indonesia at number 34, and Malaysia at number 9 (Ngamsaithong, 2012). These various comments and items of information obviously confirm that ability in English is one of the Thai students' and workforce's weak points. Therefore, immediate action from all sectors involved are needed to deal with this serious situation.

Factors to Be Acknowledged

Though Thai students start learning English in school at a very young age, they struggle to become proficient to the extent that they can use it for job applications and in a workplace, especially in the coming AEC environment. Various conditions should be taken into consideration.

1. English as a Foreign Language

The teaching of English for everyday life and for a basis for further study in Thailand started in the 1950's when there was a lot of aid from outside agencies like the Colombo Plan and the British Council. They introduced the change from the grammar-translation method to the aural-oral method. In the 1977 curriculum, changes to encourage practical communication, life-long learning and learner-centeredness were suggested. After the 1999 National Education Act and National Education Curriculum implemented in 2002, the teaching

process has emphasized learner-centered methods and the focus on language teaching has been expanded to using the language to communicate in contexts that are more meaningful to students (Darasawang, 2007).

Since Thailand does not use English as a second or official language, the opportunities to be exposed to the language in everyday life or outside the classroom are limited. However, students start to realize the importance of being proficient in English, as Suwanarak (2012: 9) found that students recognized the value of learning English because they believed English language learning to be useful not only for academic success and communication with other people internationally, but also for better job opportunities in Thailand. Unfortunately, Thai youngsters, who are fond of communication via technology such as Facebook, Line, emails or Skype, still communicate almost exclusively in Thai. For students who are eager to practice on their own, other skills can be acquired via various sources like Internet or self-access centers; however, speaking needs at least an interlocutor to converse with.

The Office of the Education Council (OEC) announced that in 20 years, Thai youth must be fluent in at least three languages, Thai, English and Chinese. (Bangkok Post Reporter, 2012). A long-term plan must be enforced but cannot be in time to prepare

Thai students to be compatible with their neighboring candidates as AEC integration will be in full effect in less than two years. The former Minister of Education announced 2012 as “English Speaking Year” (Saengpassa, 2012). Students, teachers, and officials at participating schools have been told to speak English every Monday; nevertheless, concrete results have not yet been reported. Moreover, considering the circumstances in schools, this project will be successful if teachers are able to communicate in English to the extent that they can be role models for students. It cannot be denied that students always look up to their teachers’ abilities. Therefore, teachers’ ability to speak good English is a necessity, otherwise teachers must create opportunities in class for students to practice language skills.

2. Students’ Attitudes and Thai Culture

Attitudes play an important role in learning a second language. Students with positive attitudes are more successful than those who are negative (Klein, 1990: 37-38). In studying English, students have to put more effort in practicing the language because of the differences between the two languages, mother tongue interference and limited opportunities to use English naturally, especially when students are not determined and not self-disciplined. It is known that speaking capacity accumulates slowly over time. Furthermore, it is not a self-noticed

improvement skill. As the structures of Thai and English are so different, it is not easy for Thai students to speak English fluently. Therefore, if students are not encouraged enough, they can easily lose their determination.

Culture has also affected the way students learn and practice English. Students’ attitudes and culture are interrelated because Thai society is still influenced by the “face saving” concept. Students are not willing to try to speak as they do not want to make mistakes, which is regarded as losing face and causes embarrassment. Khamkhien (2011: 96) found that students were worried about making mistakes and would feel embarrassed when speaking English in front of other people. This might explain why students do not speak English to their friends and classmates, which reduces their opportunity to practice speaking. This cultural inheritance also leads to the problem of students’ self-confidence, which affects speaking or sharing ideas in class. Rongsa-ard (2003) found that students evaluated their speaking competence as low and felt worried and stressed with communication situations in class. Therefore, group activities are sometimes not successful and this can be the reason why the “English Speaking Year” did not yield obvious results.

3. Students’ English Ability

English is obligatory in foundation courses at every university. Students are generally

required to study four English courses, which last two years. However, for students who are not English majors, they will have two years without English lessons if they do not take any English as elective courses. The two-year gap can diminish any language skills previously acquired. Moreover, in foundation English courses, not only speaking but all skills are focused on. Practice in each skill is also not as great as desired because of classes with large numbers of students and students' low English ability. The matayom 6 students' average score of English for the academic year 2011 announced by The National Institute of Educational Testing Service was 22.12% (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2013). Therefore, teachers have to spend some time in each period to review the necessary background knowledge before organizing activities for new lessons. Plailek (2011: 53) experienced the speaking limitations of first and second year English majors at a public teacher training tertiary institution in Bangkok. They include mispronunciation, limited vocabulary knowledge, inappropriate choice of words for communication, inability to converse naturally, and speaking with ungrammatically correct English.

4. Selecting Appropriate Activities

Appropriate selection of activities can boost students' learning and understanding. However, time constraint is a factor in teachers

determining the choice of activity. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and teachers. Allocating a realistic amount of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching from teachers (Center for Teaching Excellence, 2013). Since there are many students in some classes, students' activities have to be group work and the teacher's role is as a motivator and counselor, or a resource might not be appropriately shared with every group. Therefore, if the activity is not interesting enough to hold students' attention, they might be tempted to chat with each other in Thai or surf the Internet via their smart phones. This was also mentioned by Scrivener (2012) that if students are uninterested, they will be more likely to chat with friends and become unruly. So the intended results of the activity might not be attained. Time limitations, inappropriate choice of activity, the difficulty of activity chosen, the discipline of students, and efforts of students to do the activity should be taken into consideration.

Since teachers have to cover all the content mentioned in the course outline and to meet the demands of the exam, some activities might be skipped or not practiced thoroughly to the extent that makes sure that students understand the language points or gain linguistic competence expected to a level that can then be applied in new situations.

5. The Misconception of Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative language teaching derives from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research. The focus has been the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learners' participation in communicative events (Savignon, 2002: 4). Because it has been accredited by western scholars, Thai educators embraced and implemented it without hesitation. However, Thai English teachers willingly adopted the teaching method and materials but have not considered that the Thai teaching contexts are different (Methitham and Chamcharatsri, 2011: 64).

Communicative language teaching aims to develop language proficiency through interactions in meaningful contexts. This has occurred naturally because the focus has been shifted from the traditional concept of teaching English for its own sake to teaching English for language use. As the main goal of studying English nowadays is to be able to communicate in a borderless world and speaking is the most prominent skill to be judged for being proficient, some teachers might misinterpret "communicative" only to mean speaking and forget other language

components which contribute to speaking proficiency. A central concept of the communicative approach is communicative competence, which means the ability to understand and use language effectively to communicate in authentic environments.

Canale (1983) explained that the four components of communicative competence are grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes mastery of vocabulary, acceptable ways to use language, and syntax, while discourse competence means the mastery of rules to combine forms and meanings by using cohesion devices to achieve a meaningful unity of utterance. Sociolinguistic competence is about the appropriateness of language use in a variety of social situations, and strategic competence involves knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies used to compensate for communication breakdown.

With a misconception that "communicative language teaching means not teaching grammar" (Thompson, 1996: 10), and the concentration of most teachers on speaking, some teachers have overlooked grammatical competence, which provides a basis for speaking proficiency. Thai students do not use English outside the classroom and are not exposed to the language enough to

speak English as well as they do in Thai. Consequently, problems arise like limited vocabulary to express their ideas and lack of knowledge of structure to construct sentences when they speak. This means that building grammatical competence is still needed to help students have a valid foundation of English. Moreover, limited opportunities also cause hindrance in gaining the experience in learning sociolinguistic competence - the appropriateness of language use - which is also important in successful communication, especially with people from different cultures.

Adjustments Needed

There are some limitations and disadvantages in the Thai context; therefore, many teaching situations can be adjusted to boost the learning and teaching of English.

1. English Language Teaching: Adjusting to Thai Contexts

Thai language is so different from English, especially the word order. Singhapreecha (2001) mentioned that the Thai linear order of complex nominals is viewed as completely different from that of English. Therefore, Thais have to mentally construct sentences before speaking. Apart from first language interference, students have to remember vocabulary, structure, tenses, forms and positions of words. Therefore, teachers cannot overlook the teaching of grammar.

In most textbooks, lessons always start with conversations. With the misconception of the communicative approach and the overemphasis on speaking, teachers tend to teach students by forcing them to memorize conversations. No one can be sure whether students will have a chance to use exactly the same patterns in the future conversations. Therefore, the teaching of structure is still necessary as students should be taught to construct their own sentences so that they can converse and express their own ideas in any given situation. However, Nunan (2003: 159) mentioned that many courses fail to make clear the relationship between form and function. Learners are taught about the forms, but not how to use them to communicate meaning. Take the passive voice: if students are taught to transform sentences from active to passive and vice versa but not shown that passive forms have evolved to achieve certain communicative ends, they will leave the classroom with the impression that the alternative forms merely make things more difficult for them. Therefore, students need to learn how to form structures correctly as well as how to use them to communicate meaningfully. This is not a total change from conversation to traditional grammar but the proportion needs to be appropriately balanced. To make this proportion sensible to students, teachers need to create different situations for students to learn and to apply structures

studied for communicative use.

There is no teaching method that fits all contexts. To adjust the teaching method to a Thai context, teachers should draw techniques from each teaching method to suit the situations and teaching context in each institution. The start of the adjustment should be the contexts to which students can relate in order that they feel the contexts are meaningful. Teachers should set up activities which focus on multiple skills, and/or exercises which focus on the single language element, then observe and act as monitors or facilitators to help the students achieve their goal. Teachers as active facilitators should listen more and speak less. Students should be major performers, not answering only 'yes' or 'no'. Since the AEC integration is only two years away, the contexts and situations for practicing should expand to ASEAN scenarios, especially cross-cultural communication awareness.

2. Making Use of Tourism Business: Real Situations, Real Experience

Role plays and simulation are activities widely used in English classes for practicing speaking. One common activity is scripted role play - composing a dialogue according to the task assigned, memorizing the dialogue and speaking to partners. However, this can be taken as basic practice speaking because although it is role play, it cannot be compared to what happens in real situations as they

cannot know what the other person might actually say. Moreover, accent, intonation, and distraction from surroundings also play important roles affecting the understanding of the message. Therefore, students should have opportunities to experience genuine speaking situations with foreigners. Some Thai students revealed that textbooks used in English speaking courses are not interesting (Khamkhien, 2011: 101) as they are not related to the students' background and environment. Hua (1985: 168) studied techniques that Chinese students use to practice speaking skills and found that using the language in real situations can promote and develop speaking ability. Getmanee (2005: 56) conducted research on components contributing to English oral proficiency and concluded that with the minimum chance of real speaking practice and assessment, it was rather difficult for Thai students to master oral ability, no matter how long they had taken English lessons or how efficient they were in comprehending English syntax and semantics.

Thailand is one of the top countries on the list for tourists around the world. Opportunities for students to practice their English skills, especially speaking in meaningful situations with foreign tourists, are plentiful. This brings beneficial chances for students to learn different varieties of English and meet native speakers or foreigners with various and different accents. Students can be assigned

to do group work at some tourist spots in their hometown, which could be appreciated by both tourists and local businesses. Students wearing a uniform with a 'student volunteer' tag can be an opportunity for doing activities even though their English is not perfect. At the same time, students can acquire experience in both dealing with people from different cultures and gaining interpersonal and group communication skills. The following is a list of possible activities:

- Being volunteer tourist guides;
- Being assistants to the tourist police;
- Giving information at tourist centers;
- Being shop assistants at souvenir shops;
- Helping with practical matters at tourist spots;
- Giving information about food at restaurants;
- Being interpreters at police stations or hospitals.

In addition to speaking, reading and writing are also needed for working in AEC environments. Reading, summarizing, translating, and business writing are all important. Practicing these skills in class and combining them with assignments related to real situations such as producing practical materials for their community like OTOP - one tambon, one product project- would also be an ideal corporate social responsibility

(CSR) activity. Under the supervision of their teachers, students can draft information for brochures describing their area's products, create websites in English to promote tourist attractions in their hometown, or produce documentaries introducing their province and post them on the Internet. Activities like these would not only be more exciting and boost confidence because students can see their achievement, but also as a springboard for students' internship before they enter a real working environment.

However, when students are going to be sent out to gain experience in real life situations, they should be prepared so that they are not too nervous to be in contact with foreigners. Practicing in real situations will open opportunities for students to use English for communication purposes and apply their knowledge learnt in school. Moreover, this can make students realize the importance of being able to use the language. Each group can take turns to do each activity so that they can have various and different experiences and they can also share their experiences with other students who have already done the same activity. It can be used to motivate students to practice more. Recording the conversation can also give natural feedback to students. They can listen to what they said and analyze their strengths and weaknesses in using the language. Group discussion can also be used to encourage more critical thinking skills. The

following suggests things that teachers should take into consideration to prepare students.

How Should Students Be Prepared?

In order to help students obtain productive experiences, teachers should provide sufficient necessary knowledge and skills. Here are some suggestions:

1. Language Input

Since English is not a second language in Thailand, students are not expected to use the language naturally and fluently. It is necessary for students to have knowledge of structure and vocabulary to convey an understandable message. Conversing with other people requires comprehension, which encompasses structures and vocabulary. Therefore, students should be prepared in both speaking practice and structure as well as vocabulary so that they can construct meaningful sentences on their own to respond appropriately to changing contexts, and not just rely on standard expressions. According to Nunan (2003:159), success in language learning is measured in terms of the ability to carry on a conversation in the target language. If students do not have any opportunity to speak in the classroom, they may soon be demotivated and lose interest. However, all lessons can start with a conversation. After practicing the conversation, structures and vocabulary should be elicited and explained

so that students can appropriately apply them in other contexts. Teachers should give grammar and vocabulary exercises to students to review at home so that class time can be usefully spent on speaking and students can practice other skills as well. These exercises emphasize what students have practiced orally in class in order to reiterate the language points studied. Grammar exercises help boost speaking accuracy while vocabulary exercises about everyday topics can expand their vocabulary list and improve their ability to confidently use English in real-life situations (Canadian as a Second Language Institute, 2013). Teachers should make sure that students are given all the tools and language they need to be able to communicate successfully in various and different contexts.

Language input can be content-oriented, which focuses on information and can be form-oriented such as ways of using the language, guidance from the teacher on vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar (linguistic competence), appropriate things to say in specific contexts (discourse competence), expectations for pause length, turn-taking (sociolinguistic competence) and explicit instruction in phrases to use to ask for clarification and repair miscommunication (strategic competence). The amount of language input depends on the student's proficiency level.

2. Cultural Input

Though speaking with tourists is regarded as a way of practicing speaking, cultural differences should also be considered a part of the lesson learnt by students, since culture and language cannot be separated. In this globalization era, students need to learn about other countries and cultures to broaden their vision and to succeed in intercultural communication. The cultural values of both tourists and students are linked to judgments of situational appropriateness. Students should be taught to be aware and adjust their communication style to the situation at hand because understanding how a person thinks and behaves is essential for effective communication. When a person is anxious due to not knowing what he/she is expected to do, it is only natural to focus on that feeling and not be totally present in the communication transaction (Jandt, 2013: 82). Some personal questions that are regarded common and acceptable in Thai culture are sometimes found offensive in western culture like questions about age, income, health, or comments on a person's appearance. A culture's deeply held beliefs, values and norms about the 'correct' ways to behave and the 'right' ways to interpret what is happening in the world are the core aspects of intercultural communication (Lustig and Koester, 2013: 20).

Students should be told about their goal of communication, level of formality and

politeness, their body language like eye contact or personal space, and the other person's verbal and nonverbal feedback. It is known that personal space distances are different from country to country. People from colder climates typically use large physical distances when they communicate, whereas those from warm-weather climates prefer close distance (Lustig and Koester, 2013: 193). Students should also be trained to pay attention to the other person's both verbal and nonverbal reactions, especially when cultural distances are wide and the differences between the two cultures are apparent. For example, if a person slowly continues to walk away, he/she delivers a nonverbal message that he/she wants to finish the conversation without hurting feelings (Jandt, 2013: 111). Myles (2009) suggested that the importance of incorporating and fostering cultural and linguistic sensitivity and skills into their relations, strategies, and structures cannot be overemphasized.

3. Confidence

Motivation, attitudinal factors and previous experience with a second language are critical in predicting students' success in the target language (Samimy and Tabuse, 1992). Anxiety could produce negative results because students who felt uncomfortable in class tended not to take risks in communicating in the target language. Furthermore, Bailey (1983) claimed several causal factors such as

class apprehension, embarrassment of speaking the second language, a psychologically insecure learning environment and a fear of negative evaluation have a negative impact on second language acquisition. From these valid findings, students should be put in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Unscripted role play can be practiced as a starting point to create confidence in students before going out into real situations. The students in Phuetphon, Chayanuvat and Sitthitikul's study (2012) were satisfied with their teacher's empowerment to independently communicate. This indicates that they felt more confident when they could freely convey the message with their own ability.

One way to boost confidence in students is to use appropriate techniques to correct mistakes. The way teachers correct mistakes can also encourage or discourage students' confidence. Sometimes teachers might not be aware that their comments or corrections can make students feel embarrassed, especially among their classmates. Jarupan (2013) found that students had speaking difficulties like long pauses, silences, using fragments and broken words, and a general unwillingness to speak. Being afraid of making mistakes because of not having confidence can easily slow down progress. Therefore, teachers should refrain from too much error correction. Correction can be done by repeating sentences with the use of correct words and phrases after

students finish their performance. Otherwise, it will be difficult for them to develop fluency. Boonpattanaporn (2012) mentioned that one of the main factors promoting students' confidence in language learning is increasing a favorable self-conception of the target language. In fact, the purpose of speaking English is to convey the intended message. As long as the message is understood, the purpose of communication is achieved. In class, some students might use Thai language as an emotional and language support. Once their confidence grows, their dependence on their first language will decrease.

Conclusion

Since Thailand is not an English speaking country, efficient teachers should be able to create situations for their students to practice their skills. Preparing students needs to be done both academically and mentally in all English courses. Good teaching should mix knowledge and skills practice to boost students' capabilities in all aspects so that students can have an efficient springboard to confidently participate in intercultural communication. Foreign tourists are around and opportunities to practice English are there. It is only the matter of picking up these opportunities and guiding students to make full use of them. Let's make the tourism business not only the main source of income but also an authentic English classroom.

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