Thai Students’ Performance in English Independent and Integrated Speaking Tasks

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate how Thai students performed their English independent and integrated speaking tasks. Students studying in the Master’s program in English in the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University in Thailand participated in the study. The Oral Proficiency Test was developed by the researchers using the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as a model. It was also used as a research instrument. The purpose of the test was to evaluate how the participants performed those tasks. In the independent speaking tasks, the participants were required to speak in response to a given topic using their own opinions and experience. The results of the test showed that the participants’ performance in both the independent and integrated English speaking tasks was at the intermediate level. The problems that were found in both tasks were: (a) grammar usage, such as subject and verb agreement, two-word verbs, and verb inflection; (b) vocabulary limitations; (c) pronunciation; and (d) fluency. The results indicated that the four problems found made it difficult for native speakers of English to understand their speech. Therefore, recommendations for improving the speaking skills of Thai students and how to arrive at an effective way for language classrooms around the world to use English as a foreign language were discussed.

Keywords: English speaking, independent and integrated speaking tasks.
Background of the Study

Thailand has become one of the leading countries in Asia where international companies are interested in establishing their offices. The use of English has also increased among people who work in these companies. Therefore, it is necessary for Thais to have a good command of English in order to communicate with people from different parts of the world.

With the needs of English for communication for Thai people, English has become a required course for Thai students in the new National Curriculum. The goal of English teaching has been changed from a focus on grammar to communication by integrating all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) into the classroom. As a result, oral communication is one of the life skills that Thai students will be prepared for. However, Thai people still have problems communicating in English although they have studied English for years. Thus, it is important to identify specific problems that Thai people encounter in order to improve their English speaking skills.

Common Types of Speaking Skills

The common speaking skills used in everyday life, both inside and outside the classroom are divided into two types: (a) independent speaking skills and (b) integrated speaking skills. According to the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), independent speaking skills include those used to discuss opinions and to create an appropriate response to complete a successful communication goal. Independent speaking skills occur when people are communicating with each other. For example, students need independent speaking skills to discuss their opinion on a topic in the classroom, so they need to be able to speak articulately, with clarity and conviction. Integrated speaking skills are more complex than independent skills. It requires speakers to integrate information derived from written and spoken sources. Independent and integrated speaking skills help people to achieve communication goals and overcome difficulties with their speaking. Thus, to be proficient in these two skills enables ESL/EFL learners to use the language as efficiently as a native speaker.

English Speaking Difficulties of ESL/EFL Learners

Although people communicate on a daily basis, they do not always succeed in reaching their communication goals (Hybels & Weaver, 1995). When people from different countries interact in order to reach the goal of understanding each other, there are problems found within
this group due to variations in the languages used by them. To be specific, some studies were carried out to investigate ESL/EFL learners for the purposes of identifying the difficulties they encountered when they speak other languages.

Altenberg’s study (2005) reported the interference of the first language in ESL/EFL learners’ English pronunciation. It was found in this study that the first language was the cause of mispronunciation in the second language. Similarly, Yamada’s study (2005) showed that the ESL/EFL learners’ first language affects their speaking ability in the second one.

Derwing, Munro, and Thomson (2007) observed the improvement of ESL/EFL learners’ English speaking ability in their study. The results revealed that the opportunity to speak English in real life situations was crucial. That is, the group of participants who had more opportunities to speak English outside the classroom improved more than another group. Accordingly, if they had more opportunity to practice, they would be able to improve their speech.

In Thailand, Ekwanang (2004) and Noreewong (2006) conducted similar studies regarding problems that affected communication between Thai people and foreigners in their workplace. The findings in these two studies showed the same types of difficulties during conversations. They concluded that problems occurred due to the following factors: (a) misinterpretation of the contexts and the contents, (b) the accents of people from various parts of the world, and (c) the level of language. Furthermore, they claimed that some cultural barriers such as common characteristics of the Thais and cultural differences resulted in miscommunication between the Thais and foreigners.

Sursattayawong (2006) studied the difficulties that Thai nurses encountered when they spoke English at their workplace. It was found that the difficulties were: (a) grammatical errors; (b) difficulty in self-expression; (c) limited knowledge to use appropriate vocabularies; (d) inappropriate use of intonation, word stress, and mispronunciation; and (e) lack of self-confidence. In addition, it was found in Aungcharuen’s study (2006) that the Thai language interferes with a Thai person’s pronunciation of English. This resulted in the inability to speak comprehensible English. In Pawapatcharava’s study (2007), it was found that one of the problems in English language learning was students encountered intercultural communication barriers which was the accent between communicators.
As can be seen in previous studies, students encountered various problems when speaking English. The results of the aforementioned studies indicate that ESL/EFL learners had problems with speaking English which caused a failure to communicate effectively. Therefore, it is important to discover the causes of these problems and how to solve them.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to evaluate how well graduate students in the Master’s Program in English at Srinakharinwirot University performed their English speaking skills in the independent and integrated speaking tasks. The problems they encountered were also identified in order to discover solutions for common English speaking problems experienced by Thai people. Furthermore, this study was conducted to suggest some teaching and learning activities that will help to improve ESL/EFL learners’ English speaking abilities in the classroom.

**Research Questions**

1. How did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University perform the independent tasks on the *Oral Proficiency Test*?
2. How did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University perform the integrated tasks on the *Oral Proficiency Test*?
3. What problems did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University encounter in using the five speaking components (grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension) of the independent tasks on the *Oral Proficiency Test*?
4. What problems did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University encounter in using the five speaking components (grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension) of the integrated tasks on the *Oral Proficiency Test*?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Srinakharinwirot University has been known as the Higher Teacher Training School since 1949. It has developed with various academic fields, including the Faculty of Humanities.
students studying in this faculty, especially those at the graduate level, are expected by Thai society to be well qualified in social and language skills. As these skills will be used in their future careers, it is important to know how well they can genuinely perform those skills. The researchers were interested in finding out how well graduate students in the Master’s Program in English at Srinakharinwirot University could communicate. Therefore, nine students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University were voluntarily participated in this study.

**Instrument**

**The test**

The *Oral Proficiency Test* used as an instrument in this study was developed by the researchers to measure the proficiency of the participants. The speaking section on the TOEFL was used as a model because the TOEFL is accepted by more institutions than any other English language test in the world to test the English proficiency of non-native speakers of English (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2009). The *Oral Proficiency Test* provides two sections which include independent speaking tasks and integrated speaking tasks.

Two tasks were given to the participants in order to evaluate their independent speaking skills. In Independent Speaking Task 1, the participants were asked to speak about their favorite holiday and explain why it was good for them. In Independent Speaking Task 2, they were asked to express their opinion whether they think working for their own business or working for others’ is better.

To measure the participants’ integrated speaking skills, the participants were asked to complete three tasks. In Integrated Speaking Task 1, they were asked to listen to a conversation between two people discussing about a problem and its solutions. Then, they were asked to describe the problem and express their opinion on the solutions they listened to. They were also required to give reasons to support their ideas. In Integrated Speaking Task 2, they were asked to listen to a passage read by a native speaker of English about magnets then explain, describe, or recount the information they heard. In Integrated Speaking Task 3, the participants were given a passage about obesity to read. They were then asked to listen to a lecture related to it. They were also asked to explain, describe, or recount the information from the passage and the lecture in this task.
The preparation time and speaking time varied from task to task. In both of the independent speaking tasks, the participants had 30 seconds to prepare a 60 second speech. In Integrated Speaking Task 1 and 2 they had 60 seconds to prepare a 60 second speech and in Integrated Speaking Task 3 they had 60 seconds to prepare a 90 second speech.

This test was used to evaluate participants’ English speaking proficiency in the five speaking components: grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. For reasons of convenience, raters assessed the participants’ English speaking proficiency with speaking proficiency checklist that were provided for them. The scale includes five speaking components in both the independent and integrated speaking sections. The three levels, beginner, intermediate, and advanced, were used to measure each participant’s English speaking abilities. The students’ English speaking proficiency was measured according to the scores range in the participants’ English speaking measurement scale. The scale indicates scores between 0.00 to 1.99 are at the beginner level, scores between 2.00 to 2.99 are at the intermediate level, and scores between 3.00 to 4.00 are at the advanced level. Raters also commented on any problems encountered in each component.

Raters

Two native English speakers were asked to evaluate the participants’ English speaking proficiency in this study. The native speakers had some experience teaching English at Thai universities in Bangkok. They were asked to evaluate the participants’ English speaking performance and to identify problems found in the participants’ speaking.

Data collection Procedures

The participants were asked to complete these tasks one by one. They were asked to follow the instructions for each task and had different amounts of time to prepare for and perform each task. The participants were recorded and this material was then analyzed by the two raters. All data were collected during the 2009 to 2010 academic year.

Data Analysis

The results of participants’ speaking proficiency represented how well the participants responded to the independent and integrated tasks. The English speaking proficiency of the participants was measured in five speaking components as mentioned earlier. The participants’ English speaking proficiency was measured according to the scores ranged in the participants’
English speaking measurement scale. The speaking proficiency checklist was used to report any problems experienced by the participants.

Findings

Research Question 1

How did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University perform the independent tasks on the *Oral Proficiency Test*?

Results

Independent Speaking Task 1.

The results showed that three participants performed their tasks extremely well as their scores are at the advanced level. Three of them performed at the intermediate level, while the other three performed at the beginner level. The correlation between the two raters is at .88 and their significance stands at .00 ($r = .88, p = .00$).

Independent Speaking Task 2.

The results showed that the four participants performed their tasks extremely well as their scores are at the advanced level. Two of them performed this task at the intermediate level, while the other three performed at the beginner level. The correlation between the two raters is at .73 and their significance stands at .01 ($r = .73, p = .01$).

Therefore, to answer this research question, the mean score from Independent Speaking Task 1 and 2 were calculated. The results showed that the mean score calculated for the independent tasks was 2.42. It means that the independent English speaking skills of the participants were at the intermediate level.

Research Question 2

How did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University perform the integrated tasks on the *Oral Proficiency Test*?

Results

Integrated Speaking Task 1.

The results showed that the four participants performed their independent English speaking tasks extremely well as their scores are at the advanced level. Three of them performed in this
task at the intermediate level, while the other two performed at the beginner level. The correlation between the two raters is at .93 and their significance stands at .00 ($r = .93, p = .00$).

**Integrated Speaking Task 2.**

The results showed that the four participants performed at the advanced level. One of them performed at the intermediate level, while the other four performed at the beginner level. The correlation between the two raters is at .90 and their significance stands at .00 ($r = .90, p = .00$).

**Integrated Speaking Task 3.**

The results showed that the six participants performed their independent English speaking tasks extremely well as their scores are at the advanced level. Two of them performed this task at the intermediate level, while only one participant performed at the beginner level. The correlation between the two raters is at .88 and their significance stands at .00 ($r = .88, p = .00$).

Therefore, to answer this research question, the mean score of Integrated Speaking Task 1, 2, and 3 were calculated. The results showed that the mean score calculated for the integrated tasks was 2.70. This means that the integrated English speaking skills of the participants were at the intermediate level.

**Research Question 3**

What problems did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University encounter in using the five speaking components (grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension) on the independent tasks in the *Oral Proficiency Test*?

**Results**

The raters found problems in each of the five speaking components in the independent speaking tasks. In terms of grammatical accuracy, it was found that the participants had problems with word order and verb usage. In vocabulary, the raters noted that the participants had a limited vocabulary as they struggled to find the appropriate words for the tasks. Regarding pronunciation problems, the participants pronounced some words using wrong mouth, tongue, and lip position. They also spoke with wrong intonation at times. In terms of fluency, the participants created long pauses and organization flow hesitation which caused their speech to lack coherence. The errors found in these four categories caused the participants to create problems in the comprehension category. Furthermore, the raters identified two additional errors...
found in this study. These problems included the change of subject in sentences and additional /s/ sounds at the ends of words.

**Research Question 4**

What problems did the graduate students in the Master’s program in English during the 2009 to 2010 academic year at Srinakharinwirot University encounter in using the five speaking components (grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension) of the integrated tasks on the *Oral Proficiency Test*?

**Results**

The raters also found problems in each of the five speaking components in the integrated speaking tasks. In terms of grammatical accuracy, it was found that the participants incorrectly used verbs, specifically subject and verb agreement errors. The raters identified the same errors in the vocabulary category that the participants made in the independent tasks, namely limited vocabulary and a lack of knowledge of the real meanings of words. Regarding pronunciation probems, the participants also pronounced some words using wrong mouth, tongue, and lip position. In this category, it was also found that some participants spoke with the wrong intonation or in a monotone. The errors found in fluency category were that the participants created long pauses and organization flow hesitation which caused their speech to lack coherence. In the comprehension category, the raters noted that the errors that the participants made in the integrated speaking tasks were also the cause of problems found in this area. These problems included unclear information, repetition, and unorganized information. Unlike the participants’ spoken performance in the independent tasks, there were no additional errors found when they spoke in the integrated speaking tasks.

**Conclusion and Discussions**

This study was conducted to investigate the English proficiency of Thai students studying in the Master’s program in English and concerned grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. As noted in the introduction, the results of this study represent the speaking proficiency of the students and the problems found in their spoken English. In order to measure their speaking ability, the five most important components of speech were rated. This information could be used as a guideline for Thai teachers and students
to develop techniques to teach and learn English speaking in order to improve students’ speaking ability.

Regarding the proficiency of the participants in the independent and integrated speaking tasks, the results showed that the English speaking abilities of the students were at the intermediate level, which was considered lower than expected for students at the graduate level. This is especially true for English students, who should be able to communicate well in English in basic conversations such as recounting their own experiences and giving their opinions. As the integrated speaking tasks required the participants to integrate other skills such as reading and listening skills with their speaking skills, it was expected that the students would be familiar with the integration of these skills as they are often used in the classroom. The results also indicated that there were some problems or errors found when the participants spoke English during these tasks. Therefore, the researchers concluded that those problems found in both the independent and integrated speaking tasks should also be solved in order to improve the English speaking ability of the participants.

Speaking problems were found in both the English independent and integrated speaking tasks in all aspects of the five speaking components. In terms of grammatical accuracy, it was found that the participants encountered problems with verb usage as they forgot the rules regarding subject and verb agreement. In comparison to Thai language, these rules do not exist. Thus, it is possible that the students spoke without concerning about these rules which was affected by the native language. However, the findings showed that this type of error occurred with less frequency in the integrated tasks as the participants seemed to be more cautious about making mistakes than when they did the independent section. However, the problem with verb inflection occurred. This error was caused by the influences of the native language as the rule does not exist in Thai. Another problem found in this category was two-word verbs, which the participants did not completely understand and were unable to use these verbs correctly. Similarly, the students were not familiar with this type of vocabulary as it does not occur in the Thai language. This caused them confusion in selecting appropriate words for their speech. In the preposition and noun category, there was no error found even though the Thai and the English language differ in the way of express the position of objects and number of nouns that
can be pluralized. However, the raters noted that an additional error was a change of subject in sentences which may confuse listeners when the subject was incorrectly switched.

In vocabulary usage, the study showed that the participants lacked knowledge of advanced vocabulary usage, as most of them had a very simple vocabulary and struggled to find appropriate words at times. Although these participants struggled with their limited vocabularies, they at least tried to use the best strategy, which was to describe the unknown words in a way that made sense to them. However, the ability to use the appropriate vocabulary did not improve in comparison to the participants’ results in the independent tasks because they depend on the individual’s own background knowledge of vocabulary usage.

In terms of pronunciation, the participants’ main problem was with the /l/ and /r/ sound as they often mispronounced them by uttering the /l/ sound instead of the /r/ sound. As the /r/ sound in English is uttered differently than the /r/ sound in Thai, this problem occurred because of the participants’ lack of familiarity with the correct pronunciation of the /r/ sound. According to the results regarding the wrong mouth and tongue position, which cause learners to mispronounce words in English, some participants were influenced by this factor and this created problems when they spoke.

Intonation errors were also created in pronunciation category in the independent tasks when participants spoke in a monotone and the raters could not understand them, but it was also noted that these types of errors should not have occurred as they were speaking English. Additionally, the participants also uttered additional /s/ sounds at the end of words which was noted as a typical Thai pronunciation error. However, these types of errors were not found in the integrated speaking tasks.

In terms of fluency, some participants either had long pauses in their speech or spoke incorrectly in both independent and integrated speaking tasks. These problems were a result of a lack of speaking practice. The causes of these problems were also the result of a lack of good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary usage. As a result, in order to be able to speak English fluently, ESL/EFL learners need to integrate several types of knowledge or skills in order to be proficient.
Finally, in comprehension category, the raters pointed out that it was difficult to understand the participants’ speech in both independent and integrated speaking tasks because of unclear information, repetition, and disorganized information. Although the raters could guess what the participants tried to say, it could not be considered fluent speech because the information was too disorganized and this could create confusion for listeners. The raters also noted that the problems with comprehension occurred because of a lack of ability in grammar and vocabulary usage, pronunciation, and fluency.

This study is consistent with previous studies concerning the English speaking problems of Thai people which concluded that Thai people have problems with grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is very important to solve these problems as they affect the English speaking proficiency of Thai people. Accordingly, some additional activities in the English language classroom are required in order to help students overcome these problems and be more ready to use their English speaking skills in their future careers.

**Guidelines to Activities in English Language Classroom**

1. The instructors should create activities which require students to speak with their peers in various daily life situations.
2. The students should be allowed to speak more English than Thai with their peers in the English language classroom.
3. The instructors should also provide the English classroom with different source of information for students to practice their English skills integrating listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

1. The participants might be selected by students in other disciplines, such as education, business, or engineering, in order to prepare them for the ASEAN community in which English will be used as a medium of communication.
2. A relationship between background knowledge and listening comprehension needs to be investigated.
3. A qualitative study using an interview to obtain in-depth data from the participants’ problems regarding their English speaking problems should be conducted.
References


