English Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Thai Students upon Communicating with Chinese Students

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to investigate the English speaking difficulties encountered by Thai students upon communicating with Chinese students. The population of the study were 30 students who joined the exchanged project of going to China in 2017. The samples consisted of 10 students who went to Shangrao Normal University and stayed there for 15 days. They were selected via a purposive sampling method. The research tool was a semi-structured interview. It was examined by three experts in order to meet its validity. The tool's index of item-objective congruence (IOC) was between 0.67 and 1.00. The statistics used to analyze the samples' personal data were frequency and percentage while the data obtained from the interview were analyzed by using the content analysis. The research results revealed that English speaking difficulties encountered by the samples were as the following: 1) They did not get familiar with the English accents spoken by the Chinese students. 2) They did not have self-confidence of speaking English with their Chinese friends. And 3) they were shy to speak English with their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, they suggested the following ways of solving these English speaking difficulties: 1) If they cannot understand what their Chinese friends talked about, they asked the Chinese students to repeat or to write a word down. 2) Thai students kept talking to their Chinese friends and made eye-contact while they were communicating to each other. And 3) they sometimes use a body language or facial expressions to help their friends get better understanding of what they talked about.

1. Significance of the Research

At present English is an international language and widely used to communicate all over the world. People use English as a tool of communication in globalization. It is used as the lingual franca in many parts of the world. People use English with different purposes such as for education, business, technology and tourism etc. English has an official or a special status in 75 countries with a total population of over two billion. Owning to the vast extent of English use on global scale of roughly two billion users, it is necessary to learn English to respond several requirements (Crystal. 2003). Therefore, the importance of English language acquisition has been emphasized in many countries including Thailand. Even though English is used as a foreign language (EFL) in Thailand, it is undoubtedly very important for Thais who are the members of the ASEAN because English is regarded as an official working language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Speaking English is very important skill and regarded as the fundamental tool of human communication. Via this speaking, people around the globe can communicate to each other without any problems. Speaking remains the most difficult skill to master for the majority of English learners, and they are still incompetent in communicating orally in English. According to Buenos et al (2006), they state that speaking fluent English is a common problem among the nonnative. Speaking is one of the most difficult skills language learners face in language learning. It is believed that speaking is the most important of the four language skills. Many learners' stated that they had spent so many years studying English language but they cannot speak it appropriately and understandably.

According to Zhang (2009), there are many factors that cause difficulty in speaking as the following:

1. Inhibition: Students are worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism, or simply shy.

2. Nothing to say: Students have no motive to express themselves.

3. Low or uneven participation: Only one participant can talk at a time because of large classes and the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.

4. Mother-tongue use: Learners who share the same mother tongue tend to use it because it is easier and because learners feel less exposed if they are speaking their mother tongue.

Thais as EFL learners have difficulties in using English for communication, especially with listening and speaking, and this affects their English pronunciation errors or problems. One factor that could enhance their pronunciation problem could be the use of their mother tongue (Thai) as a custom (Chomphuboot, 2005). Dee-in (2006) states Thai people's problems with consonant sounds included /g/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /v/, /z/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and the problems with vowel sounds were /iː/, /ɪ/, /e/, /ə/, /u/, /uː/, /au/, /eɪ/, and /eə/.

Another study conducted by Sato (2003) finds that students of English are not highly competent in speaking because of their fear of making mistakes. The same finding showed that students fail to join in the English discussion because of their vocabulary problems and fear of making mistakes resulting in their inability to speak English well. In addition, she says that students find speaking English a stressful activity especially if they have to perform something using English.

The English speaking difficulties encountered by a students might be caused by the following factors: fear, anxiety, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation. As argued by many theorists, fear of mistake becomes one of the main factors of students' reluctance to speak in English in the classroom (Nunan, 1999; Robby, 2010). Baldwin (2011) further explains that speaking in front of people is one of the more common phobias that students encounter and feeling of shyness makes their mind go blank or that they will forget what to say. As they say, their inability to show their ability in speaking is also influenced much by their feeling of shyness. Anxiety is a feeling of tension, apprehension and nervousness associated with the situation of learning a foreign language (Horwitz et al, 1989). Tiono and Sylvia (2004) believe that anxiety about speaking a certain language can affect students' performance. It can influence the quality of oral language production and make individuals appear less fluent than they really are. Nunan (1999) says that student who lack of confidence about themselves and their English necessarily suffer from communication apprehension. This shows that building students' confidence is an important part of teacher's focus of attention. This means that the teacher should also learn from both theories and practical experience on how to build the students' confidence. With regard to the issue of motivation in learning, he also stresses that motivation is important to notice in that it can affect students' reluctance to speak in

English. In this sense, motivation is a key consideration in determining the preparedness of learners to communicate.

Lukman (2015) conducted the research on "A Study on the Problems Faced by Thai Students in Learning English Speaking at Boarding House" with the focus on three following research problems: First, what problems are faced by Thai students in learning speaking? Second, what are the causes of the problems are faced by Thai students? Third, how do the Thai students cope with their problems in learning English speaking? The research design used in this study was descriptive qualitative research design, and the data were obtained through the interview and observation. The research involved four Thai students where now in the last semester as the subject of this study. The result of the research showed that the Thai students had problems in relation with inhibition, nothing to say, mother tongue used, low or uneven in participation, and speech act. Furthermore, the result of this study also followed with the solution of the problems. The problems of inhibition was coped by being well prepared. The problem of nothing to say was coped by drilling themselves creatively. The problem of mother tongue use was coped by having more confidence to speak English. The problem of low or uneven in participation was coped by memorizing more vocabularies and studied about tenses in order to make their speaking better. Last, to cope with the speech act problems, they tried to remember and practice new vocabularies and drill their pronunciation and studied more about grammar.

Buriram Rajabhat University (BRU) had signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Shangrao Normal University (SNU), People's Republic of China in June 2016. The objective of this MoU is to facilitate mutual friendship, academic research and educational cooperation between the two institutions. Various activities had been undertaken by the two parties as the following: 1) the exchange of the faculty members and researchers, 2) the exchange of students, 3) organization of joint research projects, including conferences and meetings, 4) the exchange of information and publications, and 5) other activities mutually agreed upon by the two universities. SNU is located in Shangrao city in Jiangxi province. The city has a population of around seven million people. It is the third-biggest city in this province. SNU is one of the largest public universities with about 17,000 students, 1,000 or more lecturers, and more than programs. In June 2017, 10 Thai students visited SNU. While staying at SNU, they participated in different activities provided by SNU, for instance, learning the Chinese language and culture, cooking, field

trip, etc. Thai students use English as a medium language to communicate with Chinese students at SNU. Upon communicating English with Chinese students, they encountered some difficulties of English speaking with their counterparts. The researcher is, therefore, interested in conducting the research entitled "English Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Thai Students upon Communicating with Chinese Students" in order to investigate the English speaking difficulties faced by Thai students when they are talking to their Chinese friends. The research results are expected to be useful for the students who use English as a foreign language and the teachers who is teaching English to EFL learners.

2. Research Objectives

The objective of this research was to investigate the English speaking difficulties encountered by Thai students upon communicating with Chinese students.

3. Research Methodology

The population of this study were 30 students who the joined exchanged project of going to China in 2017. The samples consisted of 10 students who went to Shangrao Normal University and stayed there for 15 days. They were purposively selected because one of the researchers accompanied these students to China. It is noted that these Thai students were trained by taking 30-hours English for communication course and 10-hour basic Chinese language and culture course. This intensive workshop was organized by the International Relations Office, Buriram Rajabhat University.

The research tool was a semi-structured interview form. It was examined by three experts in order meet its validity. The research tool's index of item-objective congruence (IOC) was between 0.67 and 1.00. The statistics used to analyze the samples' personal data were frequency and percentage while the content analysis was made for analyzing the interview items.

4. Research Results

The results were presented as the following:

Table 1 Samples' genders

Genders	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	6	60
Female	4	40
Total	10	100

From Table 1, it showed that the most of participants were male students (60 %).

Table 2 Samples' academic year

Year	Frequency	Percent (%)
First year	1	10
Second year	4	40
Third year	5	50
Total	10	100

It indicated in Table 2 that most of the participants were the 3rd year students (50%), followed by the 2nd year (40 %) and the 1st year students (10 %), respectively.

Table 3 Samples' faculty

Faculty	Frequency	Percent (%)
Faculty of Education	2	20
Faculty of Science	3	30
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	2	20
Faculty of Management Science	1	10
Faculty of Industrial Technology	1	10
Faculty of Agricultural Technology	1	10
Total	10	100

From Table 3, it revealed that most of the participants were from the Faculty of Science (30 %), followed by the two faculties of Education, and Humanities and Social Sciences that shared the same rank of 20 %.

Having interviewed the samples about English speaking difficulties encountered by them upon talking to their Chinese friends, the following points of the difficulties were raised by them:

1. They did not get familiar with the English accents spoken by the Chinese students. They said that some English words pronounced by their Chinese friends are strange for them, for instance, the word "book" is pronounced as "boog", and the word "sheep" is pronounced as "ship", etc.

2. Some Thai students did not have self-confidence of speaking English with their Chinese friends. They were not sure if they could use English correctly in terms of vocabulary and structure. Regarding these, they cannot make differences between the two words: *above* and *on*. They were also not certain of using the English sentences, for instance, they speak "Let go to the library" instead of "Let's go to the library". Moreover, they worried about English grammar as well as pronunciation. For instance, they could not pronounce some particular English sounds; they pronounced /w/, not /v/ for the word "van", and pronounced /t/, not / θ/ for the word "mother", etc.

3. They were shy to speak English with their Chinese counterparts. Shyness is the distinctive characteristic of Thai students who rarely speak to a stranger. In the class at SNU, they liked to keep quiet and did not interact much with the Chinese students and teachers.

Regarding the English speaking difficulties solutions, they told the researcher the following points:

1. If they could not understand what their Chinese friends talked about, they asked the Chinese students to speak again or to spell a word out, and often asked them to write the word down.

2. Thai students have tried very much to keep talking to their Chinese friends, and while talking, they made eye-contact and had interaction regularly.

3. Thai students sometimes used a body language or facial expressions in order to help their friends get better and clear understanding of what they had talked about.

5. Discussion

        The research results were discussed in line with the study objective as the following:

        1.   They could not understand what the Chinese students were talking about because they were not familiar with the English accent spoken by their counterparts. This might be the reason that the English accent of the Chinese students was interfered with their mother tongue, the Chinese language, so their English pronunciation was become difficulty for the Thai students to understand. This was in accordance with the point raised by Chomphuboot (2005) who states that Thais as EFL learners have difficulties in using English for communication, especially with listening and speaking, and this affects their English pronunciation errors or problems. One factor that could enhance their pronunciation problem could be the use of their mother tongue (Thai) as a custom.

        2.   The Thai samples lacked self-confidence of speaking English with the Chinese students. They were not sure about use of correct English grammar and could not use the English correctly. They also were not able to pronounce some English particular sounds. The reason might be that they use the English language as the foreign language (EFL), not as a second language (ESL). They rarely used English with a native speakers in their city, Buriram province, Thailand. This was consistent with Dee-in (2006) who affirms that the students had problems on the English pronunciation of five consonants in the initial positions i.e., /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /r/, and of 10 consonants in the final positions i.e., /dʒ/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /l/, /r/ because some of these sounds disappeared in the Thai language and Thai people's problems with consonant sounds included /g/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /v/, /z/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/.

        3. They were shy to speak English with their Chinese counterparts. Shyness is the distinctive characteristic of Thai students who rarely speak to a stranger. This was because of their natural characteristics of ASEAN people including Thai students. This result was similar to Sato (2003) who finds that students of English are not highly competent in speaking because of their fear of making mistakes.

6. Conclusion

Thai students encountered some English speaking difficulties while communicating with Chinese friends. These problems including fear, anxiety, lack of confidence, etc. However, they had tried their best to solve all these problems by asking their Chinese friends to speak more slowly or to spell a word out, by keeping talking to their friends, and by using a body language and facial expressions.

7. Recommendations

The results obtained from this study can be applied to teach the students who use English as a foreign or a second language. The study outcomes are also useful for teaching English pronunciations and the courses relevant to cross-cultural communication.

For further studies, the comparative study should be considered by using both Thai and Chinese students as the samples in order to investigate their opinions on problems and difficulties of English communication encountered by the two parties.

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