

Factors Affecting English Speaking Problems among Engineering Students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology

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Abstract— The aim of this study is to identify the factors which affect English speaking problems among engineering students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI). This study looked at five aspects: attitude, motivation, personality, exposure to English, and management in teaching and learning English. The study also examines the comparison of the causes of English speaking problems according to students' gender. Self-compiled questionnaires were distributed to 154 first-year and second-year engineering students and conducted during the first semester of the academic year of 2013 at TNI. Stratified random sampling technique was applied. Statistics used for analysing the data were frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and t-test. The findings showed that the main causes of the students' English speaking problems were management in teaching and learning English, exposure to English, and personality. These factors were identified at a moderate level. However, motivational and attitude factors were identified at a low level of problem. This present study discusses these findings and makes implications for increasing students' opportunity to acquire a higher level of English speaking proficiency.

Keywords— factors affecting English speaking problems, causes of English speaking problems, teaching and learning English speaking, engineering students, speaking and listening problems

I. INTRODUCTION

This year, in 2015, Thailand will be officially integrated with ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). AEC 2015 is significant to the Thai economy as entrepreneurs in ten member countries can invest anywhere in these countries. Consequently, there will be a free flow of goods, services and skilled workforce [1]. In terms of a common language of communication for AEC members, all ten members have agreed to use English as an official language for business. Moreover, English is cited as the major language of international business, diplomacy, science and professionals [2]. In the field of engineering English language is an

important language tool for communication between different cultures where English is not a native tongue [3].

However, there are numerous articles, reports, research, etc. from various Thai and foreign organisations that have criticised English language communication abilities of graduate employees. For example, one of the directors of the Academic Training Section of the Tourist Authority of Thailand stated that Thai graduates have a weak command of English. Another case in the information technology sector, Dr. Rom Hiranyapruk, director of Thai Software Park, stated that Thais have high proficiency in technology but their English competence is below the average level. Lastly, companies that have employed graduates from TNI and other universities have also made comments about the low level of English communication ability of these graduate employees.

What has caused the difficulties in learning English, more specifically English speaking among Thai learners? Research in Thailand has been carried out to investigate the factors which affect a low proficiency level of English communication skills among school and university students. Examples are Mokkarawat [4], Muangmood [5], Wanthanasut [6], etc. however the samples of these studies were not in the field of engineering. There has been very little empirical research investigating the factors which affect the English speaking problems of engineering students. This research decided to undertake an investigation to identify the causes of speaking difficulties faced by engineering students. This could serve as a reference for instructors and syllabus designers at TNI to improve teaching and learning English with regard to speaking skills.

This study seeks to investigate and answer the following questions.

1. Which factors affect English speaking problems among engineering students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology?
2. Are there any differences in the factors affecting English speaking problems between male and female students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several factors that lead to a poor English speaking performance even though the students have been studying English for more than ten years. This present study considers five causes of problem. The first is the students'

attitude, the second is the students' motivation, next is the students' personality, followed by the level of the students' exposure to English, and finally management in teaching and learning English.

1. Attitude

Rubin & Thompson [7] defines attitude as one of the key factors that influences success or failure for language learners. There is a clear relationship between attitude and achievement in learning a language. A positive attitude will help learners to achieve their goals. Holmes [8] concludes in his study that when language learners have a positive attitude towards a target language, they will be successful in acquiring a target language. On the other hand, Gardner & Lambert [9] state that learners with a negative attitude do not put in the effort required to learn the language. Moreover, Littlewood [10] concludes that a bad attitude produced a barrier to the learning process. Consequently, they will lose interest in learning. Studies in Thailand have supported the adverse consequences of Thai learners, Mokkarawut [4], Muangmood [5], Wanthanasut [6]. For example, Mokkarawut's research revealed that a negative attitude could lead Thai learners to avoid speaking activities in the classroom. As a result, their communication skills were limited and that they were afraid to speak English.

2. Motivation

The term motivation has been defined differently by different schools of thought. In second and foreign language learning, Gardner [11] defines motivation as 'the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity (p.10)'. Oxford & Shearin [12] consider motivation as an important part of acquiring and retaining a new language. Language learners are different in terms of goals to achieve. McDonough [13] states that some wish to become linguists, some wish for better jobs, and others wish to be accepted in foreign countries.

According to Harmer [14], motivation can be categorised as intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to several factors which occur inside the classroom, such as teacher's personality, teacher's teaching techniques, classroom environment, etc. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is defined as factors outside the classroom. This type of motivation can be further classified into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation, Harmer (ibid). Integrative motivation is the desire to learn a language in order to integrate into the culture of the second or foreign language group and engage in the community. In contrast, instrumental motivation refers to the desire to learn a language because it fulfills certain goals such as future career, better status, or getting a place at university.

3. Personality

Personality is another factor that influences progress in language learning. Therefore, scholars like Ehrman [15], Krashen [16], Skehan [17], etc. have conducted studies relating to the relation of personality and language learning.

The results revealed a clear relationship between personality and second language acquisition. This is because personality determines things that learners feel comfortable with. Consequently, they are able to express themselves better at the given skills, Ehrman, p.101[15]. There are a number of personality characteristics that may affect second or foreign language learning. Extrovert language learners are more comfortable in group activities, McDonough [18], and produce more language output, Swain [19] than introvert counterparts. Rubin & Thompson [7] conclude that learners who are shy and inhibited are worried about their oral abilities. They tend to show less willingness to participate in the classroom and in daily-life communication. Language learners who are not afraid to make mistakes and are willing to take risk are more successful.

4. Exposure to English

There are various factors which affect learning a second or foreign language. It is undeniable that one of the most important factors is an opportunity to use a target language. According to Briere [20], the amount of time in exposure to a target language in formal and informal linguistic environments influences second language acquisition. In addition, language exposure is related to a proficiency level as a study by Lubega shows[21]. He concludes that language learning should be in a formal and informal linguistic situation, learners who had only formal exposure will achieve a lower level of language proficiency than those who had both formal and informal exposure. Numerous researchers in Thailand have suggested that extra language activities inside and outside classrooms should be encouraged Lunpraphan [22], Onkoa [23], Sirilukkananan [24], Wanthanasut [6], etc. in order to promote better oral performance.

5. Management in teaching and learning English

This is the last factor which may influence students' difficulties in acquiring communicative skills in language learning. This factor includes teachers' techniques, classroom activities, extra curriculum activities, and the course syllabus.

The teacher is a very important factor in teaching language learning. A good language teacher depends on two factors: his level of proficiency in the language, and his knowledge and expertise in language teaching techniques, Wilkin [25]. Fun and interesting inside classroom activities are closely related to teachers' skills and techniques in handling the classroom. The last two factors, extra classroom activities and the course syllabus are related to management policy within the department. These factors indirectly affect students' problems in English speaking.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Population and samples

Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology is a Private Higher Education Institute. It has four faculties: Engineering Faculty, Business Administration Faculty, Information Technology Faculty, and College of General Education and Languages. All students are non-English majors and are required to take

three compulsory English subjects including ENL-101: English for Communication 1, ENL-102: English for Communication 2, and ENL-201: English for Communication 3.

The total number of the population of this study was 606 engineering students (391 were first-year students and 215 were second-year students) in the 2013 academic year. They were taking ENL-101: English for Communication 1 and ENL-201: English for Communication 3 respectively. The core curriculum contains four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Thai instructors teach two sessions per week (one and a half hours for each session) and mainly train students in grammatical aspects, reading, and writing. Extra inside classroom activities depend on each teacher's teaching techniques. Foreign instructors teach only one session per week (one hour).

The samples of this study consisted of 154 engineering students, 77 were freshmen, 75 were sophomore, and 2 who did not indicate their year of study. Stratified Random Sampling Techniques were used to select the participants. Their gender: 121 were males, 32 were females, and 1 who did not indicate their gender. Their average age was 19 years old. They engaged in five majors which are Automotive Engineering (AE), Production Engineering (PE), Computer Engineering (CE), Industrial Engineering (IE), and Electrical Engineering (EE).

B. Research instruments

This research employed a self-compiled questionnaire and contained two parts: the first part contained open-ended questions which were about personal information including gender, age, years of study, and majors. The second part was close-ended questions and contained 37 questions. Each question was measured in a five-point Likert scale which asked participants to express their opinions in relation to levels of problems in attitude, motivation, personality, exposure to English, and management in teaching and learning. The criteria used for evaluating the degree of problems are: lowest level (1.00-1.49), low level (1.50-2.49), moderate level (2.50-3.49), high level (3.50-4.49), and highest level (4.50-5.00).

The questionnaire was piloted prior to the actual data collection. The reliability according to Cronbach's Alpha was 0.932.

C. Data analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted utilising the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) 13.0 for Window. The descriptive statistics were utilised to rank the problems from the highest problems to the least problems. Then, a t-test was utilised to determine the differences of the mean scores between two variables.

IV. RESULTS

Research question 1: Which factors affect English speaking problems among engineering students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology?

The first purpose of the present study is to investigate the factors which affect English speaking problems among engineering students. The findings of this study showed that the overall students' problems in acquiring English speaking were identified at a moderate level. When considering each factor it was found that the students identified management in teaching and learning English, exposure to English, and personality as problems at a moderate level. However, they expressed a low degree for motivation and attitude problems in acquisition of English speaking.

TABLE I
FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH SPEAKING PROBLEMS
REPORTED BY ENGINEERING STUDENTS AT THAI-NICHI
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (N = 154)

Factors Affecting English Speaking Problems	Total (N=154)		
	Mean	SD.	Frequency of problem levels
1. Attitude	2.31	0.74	Low
2. Motivation	2.18	0.67	Low
3. Personality	2.71	0.88	Moderate
4. Exposure to English	2.89	0.97	Moderate
5. Management	3.09	0.99	Moderate
Total	2.55	0.61	Moderate

Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics of a level of English speaking problem and average frequency of the level of problems expressed by 154 engineering students. The results showed that the overall factors which affected English speaking problems were at a moderate level (Mean = 2.55). Three out of five factors were rated as problems at a moderate level, these were management in teaching and learning English (Mean = 3.09), followed by the factor in exposure to English (Mean = 2.89), and finally their personality (Mean = 2.71). A low level of problems contained two factors that were students' attitude (Mean = 2.31) and their motivation (Mean = 2.18).

Research question 2: Are there any differences in the factors affecting English speaking problems between male students and female counterparts at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology?

This part presents the comparison of five causes affecting English speaking problems between male students and female peers. A t-test was carried out to identify the significance level of the difference. The criterion set for the value of significance is <.05.

TABLE 2
COMPARING FIVE FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH SPEAKING
PROBLEMS BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES ENGINEERING
STUDENTS AT THAI-NICHI INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (N=154)

Factors Affecting English Speaking Problems	Gender					
	Males		Females			
	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.	t	P
1. Attitude	2.33	0.76	2.20	0.63	0.91	0.366
2. Motivation	2.22	0.66	2.02	0.65	1.55	0.122
3. Personality	2.71	0.89	2.72	0.85	-0.04	0.965
4. Exposure to English	2.93	0.99	2.73	0.87	1.02	0.308
5. Management	3.05	1.05	3.22	0.75	-0.83	0.407
Total	2.57	0.64	2.48	0.50	0.74	0.464

*Statistical significant at .05 level

Table 2 shows that the mean scores of overall factors affecting English speaking problems indicated by male students were higher than that of female counterparts, but not at a significant level $p < .05$. In other words, the problems in English speaking reported by male students and female peers were not significantly different.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that there was no item in any of the factors that students rated as a high level problem. Three out of five factors were expressed as a moderate level problem, these were management in teaching and learning English, exposure to English, and personality. Attitude and motivation factors were rated at a low level.

Firstly, the factor concerned in management in teaching and learning consists of teachers' techniques, classroom activities, extra curriculum activities, and the course syllabus.

The highest concern expressed by the students was in the extra curriculum activity item such as a field trip with foreign instructors (mean = 3.41), next was about outside classroom activities such as summer camping or a short course broad (mean = 3.25). This may imply that students prefer to be exposed to real-life situations where they can practise English speaking with foreign speakers. The students were also concerned about the limited time of speaking sessions with foreign instructors (mean = 3.17). This concern confirms their preference in exposure to foreigners.

The students' next concern is about the opportunity to speak English, they expressed the highest concern in practising English speaking with their parents and siblings (mean = 3.20). It could be inferred that they want to practice speaking with their family who support and boost their self-confidence. Unfortunately, they did not have adequate time to do so due to the heavy burden of their studies. The next item was their concern in practicing speaking with their peers (mean = 2.98). It may be inferred that they are well aware of the importance of having the opportunity to practice their speaking English. The students also expressed their concern about the lack of chance to study abroad (mean = 2.96).

The next factor is student's personality, their highest rated problem was about being worried to make mistakes (mean = 3.12) and being laughed at when making grammatical mistakes in the language (mean = 2.93). This present study supports the finds of Toosiri [26], Vithikul [27] which report that Thai students lacked self-confidence when speaking English. These obstacles can prohibit the speaking progress when learning a foreign language as stated in the study by Rubin & Thomson [7].

The forth factor affecting students' English speaking was attitude. It was indicated as a problem at a low level. In other words, several students expressed positive attitudes in the importance of learning to speak English (mean = 1.74). This finding concurs with Thaneeyapanich [28] who reveal that Thai students showed positive attitudes in learning English. However, students expressed negative attitudes in terms of putting little effort in self-studying during free-time (mean = 3.36). This present result also supports Thaneeyapanich [28] who discovered that Thai students had high motivation in learning English but they had bad attitudes in devoting their time to practising outside the classroom.

The final factor concerns the students' motivation, their highest level problems were about the lack of improvement in their English speaking abilities (mean = 2.89) and a lack of self-confidence in communicating with foreigners (mean = 2.86). Fortunately, even though they faced several problems, they did not think that learning to speak English was a waste of time. They were well aware of the importance of English for their future careers (mean = 1.61). This may imply that they are fully aware of the importance of speaking English for further education and better career opportunities.

Discussion of Finding Two

The findings of this study demonstrates that there was not a significant difference in overall English speaking problems between male and female engineering students at a confidence level of .05. This present study supports the research of Jindathai [29] and Ghazvini & Khajehpour [30] which stated that there was no significant difference between males and females in second and foreign language learning.

Implications of the study

According to the present findings, the students' highest concern was about participating in outside classroom activities. So teachers can give more opportunities for students to acquire English language through an informal acquisition by arranging an interview trip with foreigners at popular a tourist attraction such as JJ Market, a floating market, etc. Another interesting activity is having a short duration English camp for a few days during a summer term. English games and fun activities should assist students to feel relaxed and feel less worried about making mistakes. In the area of studying abroad, a language school in an ASEAN country such as Malaysia or Indonesia can be used as a safe place for students who want to expand their experience and increase their exposure to English in a real-life situation.

Even though outside classroom activities are useful and provide a lot of advantages for students to acquire informal language learning, formal classroom activities are also helpful in terms of providing training for learners in a classroom setting before being faced by a real-context situation. Therefore a simple activity such as story telling or role-play in pairs or in groups in relation to a daily-life conversation should be organised regularly in order to increase students' confidence. Furthermore, challenging and interesting materials should be introduced and implemented to avoid boredom.

VI. REFERENCES

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