

## The Enhancement of English Speaking Ability of The Visually Impaired Students Using Blended Learning

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### ABSTRACT

The purposes of the study were: 1) to investigate and compare the English speaking ability of the visually impaired students before and after learning English speaking using blended learning and to examine the students' attitude towards teaching English speaking using blended learning. The sample is comprised of twelve visually impaired students of Khon Kaen School for the Blind in Lower Secondary School who attended English classes on Saturdays, selected using purposive sampling. The research design was a one group pretest-posttest design. The research instruments consisted of 12 lesson plans for both online lessons using CourseVille Learning Management System and face-to-face instruction, an English speaking ability test and an attitude questionnaire. The experiment was conducted for 12 weeks, 2 hours for each week with a total of 24 hours for all lessons. The data were collected from the pretest and posttest instruments and the attitude questionnaire. The statistics used for analyzing the data were mean, percentage, standard deviation, one sample t-test and t-test for dependent samples. The findings of this research were as follows: 1) The students' pretest and posttest mean scores on English speaking ability were 165.16 or 66.06 percent and 205.58 or 82.23 percent respectively. The students' English speaking ability posttest mean score was not less than 70 percent and higher than that of the pretest. 2) The students' attitude towards teaching English speaking through blended learning was at a good level.

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### Background and Rationale

Proficiency in the English language is in demand in different corners of the world. The United Nations recognizes the English language as the “world language” and the lingua franca of our world today. Aside from the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2008: 29) also declares the English language as the working language of its regional block as stipulated in Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter. According to Baker Mckenzie (2019: 1), a law firm, stated that Thailand is one of the countries in Southeast Asia that interests investors from Asia-Pacific Region. It is therefore imperative for Thailand as an investment destination to improve the English language skills of its citizens.

Moreover, besides the need to improve the English language skills there is the need for technology in our daily life. Singh (1991: 61) remarks that technology will continue to define the societies of 21<sup>st</sup> century. In response to this demand, the Thai government launched the new economic model called Thailand 4.0 to free the country from impediments of development and promote inclusion in the society (Thailand Department of International Economic Affairs, 2017: 19). The Thailand Department of International Economic Affairs further explained that technology development along with innovation and connecting Thailand to the global community are agendas included in Thailand 4.0. Therefore, IT skills should not only be exclusively taught in IT courses but it should also be incorporated in teaching other disciplines. One way to do this is delivering the lessons through blended learning.

There have been efforts made by the Thai government to promote the English language and integrating technology in teaching and learning process. The Office of National Education Commission (1999:12) through the National Education Act of 1999, authorized the Basic Education Commission to design the core curriculum for basic education, in which English language is made a priority. Apart from the English language, technology is also given emphasis by the National Education Act of 1999. Section 23 of the said Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999: 11) stipulates that guidelines on learning process include promoting the usage of technology and lifelong learning.

However, there are issues in Thai classrooms that impede students from improving their English communication skills including their speaking ability. Noytim (2006: 231) states that in Thailand, most classrooms are still teacher-centered instead of student-centered. Kongkerd (2013: 10) admits that the current teaching approaches to teaching English in Thailand don't support learners to be competent users of the English language. Radic-Bojanic, Topalov & Sinwongsuwat (2015: 10) observe that in the case of low speaking proficiency, results have identified factors including the insufficient amount of opportunities for Thais to speak the English language outside the classroom.

As Thailand moves towards improving the English language proficiency of its citizens, the Thai visually impaired students should not be left behind in this national endeavor. As stated by the European Union (2015: 9), learning the English language will enable persons with visual impairment to access information from other parts of the world that are useful for their learning and can increase their awareness about the services they need. The European Union further explained that the knowledge of the English language will also enable them to communicate with other people in the world.

Khon Kaen School for the Blind, as one of the schools founded and supervised by the Christian Foundation for the Blind in Thailand (CFBT) under the Royal Patronage of H.M. the King follows a policy of promoting the learning of the English language and technology among visually impaired students.

However, the survey conducted by the CFBT Special Affairs Department (Survey on the Students' English Language Skills; 2018: 3) revealed that only 19% of the students in lower and upper secondary school who study in the mainstream schools can communicate well. According to the same survey (Survey on the Students' English Language Skills 2018: 2), the majority of the visually impaired students in lower and upper secondary school are interested in learning English online. This suggests that there is a potential motivation among these students to learn English online.

The significance of English speaking ability and the implication of technology in learning inspired the researcher to attempt enhancing the English speaking ability of visually impaired students by providing sufficient background knowledge through online learning and by providing

more time to practice speaking through interactive activities in the classroom. The combination of online learning and face-to-face instruction; or learning with a teacher in the classroom, is called Blended Learning (BL).

Dudeney & Hockly (2007: 137) define blended learning as a combination of online and face-to-face delivery of instruction. Learning Management System is one of the tools used for online learning. Ellis (2009: 1) defines Learning Management System or LMS as a software application that automatically manages, track and record teaching activities. Ellis (2009: 5) further explained that the LMS allows assessment and course authoring. In this study, online learning is accomplished through the use of an LMS called CourseVille. CourseVille is an LMS developed by the Learning Innovation Center of Chulalongkorn University to serve as a channel to deliver learning resources and teaching instruction via internet browsers like Google Chrome and Safari, and is accessible on computer and smart phones (CourseVille Manual, 2015). Courseville is also made accessible for visually impaired people (CourseVille System User Guide for Visually Impaired Learners, 2020). The visually impaired students in this study were allowed to use either the computer or their mobile phones for the online learning. Face-to-face instruction facilitated by the teacher in the classroom followed after each session of the online learning.

There has already been research studies conducted in Thailand about the impacts of blended learning on teaching and learning the English language (Tananuraksakul, 2016:48–55; Banditvilai 2016: 220–229; Sucaromana 2013: 141–147). However, even though many studies have reported the significance of blended learning in English language teaching and learning, there has been a scarcity of research studies focusing on the role of blended learning in improving the English language proficiency of visually impaired students. The purpose of this study is therefore to ascertain the effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing the English speaking ability of the visually impaired students.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To study and compare the visually impaired students' speaking ability before and after teaching English speaking ability using Blended Learning
2. To explore students' attitude towards the teaching of English speaking using Blended Learning.

## Research Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the study were as follows:

1. The students' speaking ability is more than 70% set criterion after being taught English speaking using blended learning.
2. Students' posttest scores are higher than the pretest scores after being taught English speaking using blended learning.
3. The Blended Learning Program can motivate students to learn and improve their English speaking ability.

## Scope of the Study

### Population and sample

The population used in this research is composed of Mathayomsuksa students of Khon Kaen School for the Blind who are studying English in the first semester of the academic year 2019 for supplementary education. There are 2 classes with a total population of 25 students. These visually impaired students are enrolled in inclusive schools around Khon Kaen and stay at Khon Kaen School for the Blind for boarding and supplementary education.

The sample population of this study is composed of twelve visually impaired students of Khon Kaen School for the Blind in lower secondary school who attend English classes on Saturdays.

### Variables

The variables of this study include the following:

#### 2.1 Independent Variable

The independent variable of this study is teaching English speaking ability using Blended Learning.

## 2.2 Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this study are the following:

2.2.1 Visually impaired students' English speaking ability

2.2.2 Visually impaired students' attitude towards teaching English speaking ability using Blended Learning

### Teaching Contents

The content of this study included 12 lessons that were delivered in English classes both online and face-to-face. These lessons focused on improving the speaking ability of the visually impaired students. The lessons were selected from the book Access 1, Access 2 and Access 3 that are used to teach English to Mathayom 1-3 students in the mainstream schools. The following are the lessons: 1. Basic Introductions; 2. My Class Schedule; 3. My Favorite Food; 4. My House, 5. My Family; 6. Household Chores; 7. Holidays and Festivals; 8. My Abilities and Present Activities; 9. Actions in the Past; 10. Health is wealth; 11. Jobs and Personal Qualities; 12. Plans for the Holidays

### Duration

This study was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2019. Each lesson was conducted once a week for 2 hours and ran for 12 weeks. The total number of hours in delivering the lessons was 24 hours.

### The Process of Teaching English Speaking Ability Using Blended Learning Employed in this Study

In this study the researcher has carefully examined concepts, theories and research studies relating to the development of English speaking ability using blended learning. The researcher developed teaching and learning activities in developing the English speaking ability by combining two classroom environments namely, the online-learning and face-to-face instruction.

The researcher employed the blended learning model by Dudeney and Hockly (2007: 137) combined with the PPP Model adapted from Harmer (1991: 60-62).

The model of blended learning of Dudeney & Hockly (2007: 137) employed in this research is a combination of online delivery of instruction and face-to-face instruction in the classroom. Dudeney & Hockly (2007: 140–141) suggest that the designer of the blended learning course should consider answering the demands related to delivery mode, task design and materials, learners, teachers/instructors, assessment and evaluation. Concerning the ratio of teachers and students, Dudeney & Hockly proposed that there should be 6–10 participants for each teacher in order to suit the workload and allow one-to-one instruction. These theories of Dudeney & Hockly are reflected in the researcher's design of implementing blended learning fused with the PPP Model of Harmer (1991: 60–62).

The process of teaching English speaking using blended learning which includes the three steps of teaching, namely Presentation, Practice and Production, is presented as follows:

### 1. Online learning

The online learning refers to implementing the presentation stage of the PPP Model proposed by Harmer (1991: 60–62). The online activities involved in this stage is done through CourseVille, a Learning Management System that enables the students to study online by accessing learning materials in audio, video and text file. The details of the online learning in this study are presented as follows:

#### 1.1 Presentation

##### 1.1.1. Lead in

The teacher leads the students into the lesson by asking them to watch a video related to the lesson.

##### 1.1.2 Elicitation

The teacher asks the students about the content of the video in the form of question posted online that students have to answer after watching the YouTube video about the topic.

##### 1.1.3 Explanation

1) The students study the vocabulary, expressions and structures related to the lesson through the following activities on CourseVille: reading the MS Word file

containing the lessons on vocabulary and structure and doing the listen and repeat activity through the audio file on YouTube.

2) The students watch the video of the conversation related to the lesson with a copy of the video script.

3) The teacher asks the students to repeat the conversation.

4) The teacher asks the students to practice in pairs before the face-to-face instruction.

## **2. Face-to-face Instruction**

In this study, face-to-face instruction means teaching and learning by following the practice and production stage of the PPP Model devised by Harmer (1991: 60–62) with both teacher and students physically present in the classroom. The details of the face-to-face instruction in this study are presented as follows:

### **2.1 Practice**

2.1.1 The teacher assigns the students to work in pairs to accomplish the communicative activity (Information Gap Activity)

2.1.2 The teacher provides Worksheet 1 (Student A and Student B) to the students and practice with their partner

2.1.3 The teacher asks the students to ask and answer questions from the Worksheet 1.

2.1.4 The teacher asks the students to practice speaking English according to the completed Worksheet 1.

2.1.5 The teacher distributes Worksheet 2 to the students and demonstrates the Information Gap activity by acting as Person A and asks one student to be Person B.

### **2.2 Production**

The teacher assigns the students to create a new dialogue out of the situations provided in Worksheet 2.

2.2.1 The teacher assigns the pair of students to present their dialogue.

2.2.2 The teacher assesses the students' performance based on their pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary knowledge, fluency, and comprehension.

2.2.3 The teacher and the students conclude the lesson by reviewing the vocabulary and structures used in the activity.

2.2.4 The teacher provides corrective feedback regarding the students' performance.

The teaching steps for teaching English speaking ability using blended learning is presented in the figure on the next page.

In summary, the process of teaching speaking using blended learning consists of 3 steps: Presentation, Practice and Production. These steps are divided into 2 learning environments: Online and Face-to-Face. Presentation is done online; and Practice and Production are done through Face-to-Face instruction in the classroom.

## **Research Method**

### **Population and Sample**

#### **1. Population**

The population of this study was composed of 25 visually impaired students in secondary school who study English at Khon Kaen School for the Blind on weekends.

#### **2. Sample**

The sample population of this study was obtained through purposive sampling. Twelve visually impaired students of Khon Kaen School for the Blind in lower secondary school who attend English classes on Saturdays were selected to be the sample population of this study.

### **Research Instruments**

This study employed three types of research instruments. The description of the research instruments on how they were constructed is presented here.

#### **1. Lesson plans**

For teaching English speaking ability using blended learning, 12 lesson plans were devised for 12 weeks of teaching. Each lesson is good for two-hour online and face-to-face instruction in the classroom.

## 2. Online Lessons

The online lessons were composed of 12 lessons. These lessons were available on CourseVille. The content of each lesson includes vocabulary, grammar and listening and speaking exercises. The students had to access the online course through mobile phones or computer before the face-to-face instruction.

## 3. English Speaking Ability Test

The speaking ability test was constructed based on the target language functions for each lesson. The 1–5 scale from Harris (1969: 81–82) was adapted and modified in order to suit the background of the visually impaired students with 5 being the highest and 1 as the lowest. The criteria for the assessment included: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The congruency between the test items and the objectives was measured and it yielded an IOC (Item Objective Congruence) of 1.00.

## 4. Students' Attitude Questionnaire

The students' attitude questionnaire was used to measure the students' reaction towards using blended learning in teaching English speaking ability. The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of mean scores and standard deviation on a five-point Likert scale. The Item Objective Congruence (IOC) was found to be 1.00.

### Data Collection

This study was conducted in the first term of the academic year 2019 for 24 hours. The research involved 12 lesson plans with 12 different topics. A pilot study was done in order to evaluate the feasibility of the implementation of the research instruments. The process of data collection during the experiment can be described as follows:

#### 1. Data from the test

- 1.1 The pretest was conducted.
- 1.2 The 12 lessons were taught 2 periods a week. Each period is equivalent to 60 minutes or 1 hour.
- 1.3 The posttest was conducted.
- 1.4 The data was collected and analyzed using the SPSS program

## 2. Data from the questionnaire

2.1 Students completed the students' attitude questionnaire

2.2 The data from the questionnaire was interpreted

### Data Analysis

1. The scores from both pretest and posttest were carefully analyzed using the Social Sciences Research (SPSS) program. These are basic statistics that were employed to analyze the research data using SPSS program: Percentage, Mean, Standard Deviation, One Sample t-test and Sample t-test.

2. The Index of Item Object Congruence based on Rovinelli & Hambleton (1977:49–60) was used to evaluate the quality of the instruments used in this study.

3. The scores of the pretest and posttest were compared and analyzed using t-test for dependent samples and One Sample t-test through Social Sciences Research (SPSS) program.

4. The data gathered from the attitude questionnaire was analyzed.

### Conclusions of the Study

**Table 1** Comparison of students' English speaking ability score after studying English speaking using blended learning and a set criterion of 70 percent.

Test	n	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Criteria	t
Posttest	12	205.58	17.05	70%	11.07

\*\* $p \leq .01$

The results on Table 1 revealed that the students' posttest mean score on English speaking ability was 205.58 which is equivalent to 82.23 percent, significantly different at .01. The posttest score was significantly higher than the set criteria of 70 percent.

2. The results of the comparison of the students' pretest and posttest mean scores on English speaking ability through blended learning.

**Table 2** Comparison of the students' score before and after learning English speaking using blended learning

Test	n	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	t
Pretest	12	165.16	7.84	11.07**
Posttest	12	205.58	17.05	

\*\* $p \leq .01$

As shown in Table 2, the pretest mean score on English speaking ability was 165.16 and the posttest mean score was 205.58. When compared, it revealed that the posttest mean score was significantly higher than that of the pretest at the .01 level.

#### **Results of the students' attitude towards learning English speaking through blended learning**

After delivering the instructions using the 12 lesson plans of teaching English speaking using blended learning, the researcher investigated the students' attitude towards the teaching method through the use of an attitude questionnaire composed of 25 items. It was administered to 12 students who participated in the experiment and the results are presented below.

**Table 3** Results of students' attitude towards learning English speaking using blended learning

Attitude Questionnaire	n	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Students' attitude towards teaching English speaking using blended learning	12	3.79	0.44	Good

Based on the data in Table 3, the mean score value of 12 students' attitude score was 3.79 after teaching English speaking using blended learning. This is an indication that that teaching English speaking through blended learning was at a good level.

## Discussion

The objectives of this research were: firstly, to study and compare the visually impaired students' speaking ability using blended learning by measuring the mean score of the pretest and posttest before and after conducting the treatment; secondly, to explore students' attitude towards teaching English speaking through blended learning. The discussion of the findings are as follows:

1. The study and comparison of students' English speaking ability before and after learning English speaking through blended learning revealed that the pretest mean score was 165.16 or 66.06 percent, and the posttest mean score was 205.58 or 82.23 percent. The results revealed that the posttest mean score was higher than the set criteria of 70 percent, which conforms to the first hypothesis. It demonstrates that teaching English speaking using blended learning is highly effective in enhancing the English speaking ability of the students. In addition, the posttest mean score was also higher than that of the pretest, which was in line with the second hypothesis. According to the findings, the students' pretest mean score was low because they don't have a good background in English and they are not motivated to learn English. It is also essential to know that these students have not taken English supplementary classes on weekends for two years due to the lack of an English teacher to teach them. Furthermore, these students lacked the confidence to speak English, knew insufficient vocabulary, could not pronounce words correctly, used incorrect grammar and lacked of comprehension of the English language.

Nevertheless, the use of blended learning in teaching English speaking to the visually impaired students was able to enhance their English speaking ability due to the following reasons:

First, blended learning was able to provide ample time for students to prepare for more practice in the classroom. The online learning helped establish a background about the topic before the oral production in face-to-face instruction. Through online learning before the face-to-face instruction, the students were able to gain the knowledge needed in order for them to produce the language during the face-to-face instruction. This knowledge includes the vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, strategies for fluency and comprehension of the language

associated with the topic. Item 24 with a mean score of 4.33 on table 14 highlights that a significant number of students believe that blended learning helps them remember the vocabulary. This is further supported by the mean score of item 25 of the above mentioned table 4.50 which suggests that the students perceived blended learning as an approach that helps them prepare for speaking tasks. This conclusion appeared to be supported by Egbert & Hanson-Smith (1999: 3–6) in his claim that learners have enough time to learn through blended learning. This is also in line with Bath & Bourke's (2010: 1) argument that blended learning broadens the spaces and opportunities available for learning.

Second, blended learning was able to provide opportunities for the students to be exposed to authentic materials online and to practice conversation during face-to-face instruction that they could associate with real life experience. This is supported by the result of item 3 on table 14 showing a mean score of 4.42. It suggests that students perceived the activities as similar with communication that they encounter in real life. These findings are consistent with the characteristics of blended learning identified by Egbert & Hanson-Smith (1999: 3–6) emphasizing students' exposure to authentic tasks.

Lastly, blended learning was able to engage students in a systematic kind of learning by employing the blended learning model devised by Dudeney and Hockly (2007: 137) and incorporating the PPP Model of Harmer (1991: 60–62) to come up with an integrated mode. This integrated model was able to cover all the five criteria of Harris.

2. The study of the students' attitude towards learning English speaking through blended learning suggests that the students' attitude was at good level. Most students agreed that the use of blended learning in learning English speaking was very good based on table 14 where item 1 has a mean score of 4.00. Results revealed that the students enjoyed studying English through blended learning. The findings also indicated that students perceived that blended learning makes them an independent learner. This is supported by the results of item 22 with a mean score of 4.33. The majority of the students believe that blended learning activities made them more creative in coming up with their own dialogues based on the results of item 5 on table 14 which gives a mean score 4. These results agree with Egbert & Hanson-Smith (1999: 3–6) in their claim that blended learning fosters learner autonomy.

In conclusion the researcher found that blended learning enhanced the English speaking ability of the students as indicated by the successful posttest based results which showed an increase in students' achievement. Blended learning did not only increase the achievement of the students but it also improved the students' behavior towards learning English speaking.

### **Recommendations**

The findings from this study indicated that teaching English speaking using blended learning enhanced students' speaking ability and their attitude toward learning speaking ability using blended learning.

1. The recommendations from this study are as follows:

1.1 The background of the students should be carefully examined and should be considered in designing the blended learning program

1.2 The technical skills that are required by the blended learning program should be assessed to ensure that students will focus more on the language activities

1.3 The readiness of the students and the environment should be assessed in designing the blended learning program to ensure success in the implementation

2. Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of the study revealed a need for further research involving the following:

2.1 Designing and developing the modules of the Learning Management System that could be utilized better to provide a digital learning environment for assisting other visually impaired students. There is also a need for further research on ways to organize and manage online resources that can be integrated in the existing English curriculum for effective autonomous learning and collaborative interaction. This will maximize the English learning experience of visually impaired students in the blended environment.

2.2 Providing learning strategy training and constant technical support that could help the visually impaired students be better accustomed to this new learning model. The application of blended learning to the current language learning and teaching has been the mainstream of language education in the present age. Researchers should take advantage of this good opportunity to make more in-depth research in this field.

2.3 Investigating into how the visually impaired students and people with other types of disability can benefit from the available mainstream digital platforms in terms of improving their knowledge and skills.

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