"Teacher, please speak English with me": STUDENTS WANT ENGLISH TEACHERS TO SPEAK ENGLISH

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Abstract

This study investigates students' desire for their English teachers to communicate with them in English both inside and outside the classroom. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. It surveyed the opinions of 45 students enrolled in the Business English for International Communication Program at Phranakhon Rajabhat University and interviewed 10 language teachers and students. It was found that most Thai teachers do not use English when speaking with students for fear that the students may not understand. However, the teachers still hope their students will achieve proficiency in speaking English. Conversely, most students expressed their desire for teachers to consistently speak English with them. However, this demand has not yet been met. It is suggested that English teachers listen to their students to alleviate frustration for both parties. Additionally, engaging in small talk with students outside the classroom is encouraged for all English teachers.

Keywords: English language; Students; Speaking

Introduction

I've been teaching English for over 20 years. As language teachers, we are often asked why Thai students cannot speak English despite having learned the language since Grade 1 until they finish university, totaling about 16 years of study. There have been hundreds of studies regarding this topic, attempting to provide answers as to why our students cannot speak proper English after these long years of study. Mostly, academics have voiced their opinions that the examinations at all levels of the Thai education system are grammar-based, rather than focused on speaking. Consequently, there is no incentive for students to attempt speaking English. To pass all the exams, they simply read and memorize language rules. This is an undeniable fact that we have to accept.

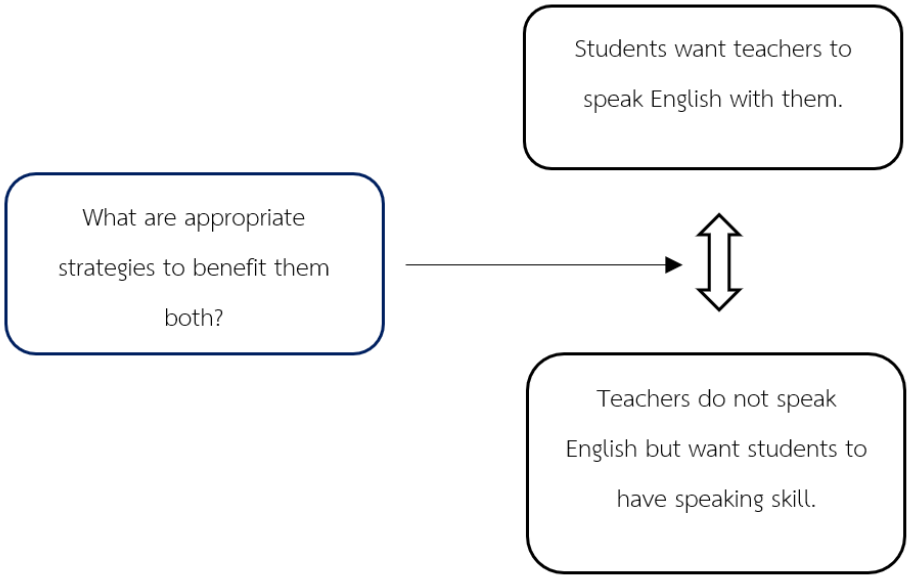
Almost all Thai public media use the Thai language to convey messages, so the general Thai public lacks the chance to engage in English speaking and listening. Moreover, most English classrooms in the country still lack a supportive environment for students to practice speaking English. Most students are more familiar with grammar translation, rote learning, reading, and writing than English conversation (Yusica, 2014). All national-level language tests such as the Ordinary National Education Test (ONET) and A-Level Test, which are grammar-based, have forced language teachers to shift their focus to linguistic rather than communicative competence (Kwon, 2017). All of these factors have led students to realize that grammar, structures, and vocabulary, rather than speaking skills, help them secure desired seats in university.

In our program of Business English for International Communication (BEIC) at Phranakhon Rajabhat University, there are around 200 students in our weekday and weekend classes. It is a bilingual program. I taught two classes in the second semester from November 2023 to February 2024, namely English Reading for Business 1 and Varieties of English Interactions. The first one is the weekend class for Year 1, and the second one is the weekend class for Year 3, totaling 45 students altogether. Before the semester started, I made an agreement with both classes that we shall use English 100% in class and outside of class. Most of them raised their hands in agreement. The only question I wanted to ask students after this little experiment was whether they wanted all the teachers to speak English with them all the time or not. This paper provided me with all the answers.

Research Objectives

This study investigates the demand of students for their English teachers to communicate with them in English in order to fulfill their needs.

Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Through purposive sampling, a set of questionnaires was used to survey 45 students enrolled in two classes: English Reading for Business 1 and Varieties of English Interactions. The study took place during the second semester, from November 2023 to February 2024. Additionally, ten students and teachers were interviewed to gather their opinions regarding the use of English both inside and outside the classrooms. Statistics used were frequency, mean and standard deviation.

Literature Review

For every five people we encounter on the planet, one of them would be able to speak English, as English is currently the most learned language in the world (Lyons, 2021). Approximately 1.5 billion people, or 20% of the world's population, can speak English. Thailand is renowned worldwide as a tourist destination, welcoming 30 million tourists annually. However, the level of English usage remains low. Thai students struggle with English, as evidenced by national test results. The ONET 2019 data revealed that 692,708

Grade 6 students scored an average of 34.42 out of 100 in the English subject, while 665,310 Grade 9 students scored 33.25 and 363,678 Grade 12 students scored 29.20, respectively (Thai Post, 2020). Education First, a well-known Switzerland-based English testing organization, ranked Thailand 101st out of 113 countries where English is not the mother tongue. Among the top five are the Netherlands, Singapore, Austria, Denmark, and Norway. In Asia, the Philippines is ranked 20th and Malaysia 25th (Education First, 2023).

Because communicative competence is not required for university entrance examinations, language classrooms across the country teach English primarily to pass written exams (BBC, 2018). However, some parents oppose this traditional practice and desire their children to speak English. For instance, Mrs. Salinee Geasee, a native Thai speaker, converses in English with her two children, ages 5 and 3, daily, resulting in their fluent English proficiency. She highlights the failure of language education in schools, where teachers prioritize grammar over speaking skills (Thai PBS, 2020).

Niratisai (2018) discovered that learners' attitudes toward English learning significantly impact their proficiency. Positive attitudes enhance learning outcomes. Udomkiatisakul (2016) found that learners' family background and learning activities affect their anxiety levels in English speaking. Learners also fear negative judgments when speaking English. Additionally, Nithivaraphakul & Krasair (2012) noted that listening is the most challenging aspect of English study for Thai students, who fear making grammatical errors when speaking.

To address these fears, teachers should use English more frequently with their students. Consistent English language immersion is essential for developing speaking proficiency. When teachers exclusively use English in the classroom, students are continuously exposed to authentic language contexts, enhancing their language acquisition (Krashen, 1981). Immersion provides opportunities for listening and speaking practice, leading to improved fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Nation, 2009). Moreover, exposure to English facilitates the internalization of grammatical structures, enabling effective communication (Krashen, 1985).

Furthermore, an English-only classroom environment encourages students to take risks and experiment with the language. In a supportive setting, students feel comfortable participating in conversations, expressing their thoughts, and asking questions without fear (Swain, 1985). Active participation promotes confidence and motivation, fostering a positive

learning environment (Dörnyei, 2006). Additionally, teachers model language use and provide immediate feedback, helping students refine their skills (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Teachers should also speak English outside the classroom. Maintaining an English-only policy inside and outside the classroom is crucial for language development. Immersion creates an environment conducive to learning, where students practice and improve their English proficiency. Through exposure and participation, students enhance their speaking skills and develop confidence. Therefore, teachers should speak English with students consistently to support their language acquisition effectively.

Developing English speaking proficiency offers numerous benefits for Thai students academically and professionally. Firstly, fluency opens doors to educational opportunities, including international universities and exchange programs. Proficiency enables effective engagement with academic literature and global discussions. Secondly, proficiency enhances employability, as many multinational corporations require English communication skills. Additionally, English proficiency facilitates cultural exchanges and cross-cultural communication.

In conclusion, Thai language education emphasizes grammar over speaking skills, impacting students' communication abilities. Teachers, especially at the elementary level, lack English specialization training, further hindering English language instruction. Wealthier families can afford language schools, but socioeconomic disparities limit access. It's essential for teachers to address this issue and find ways to support their students effectively.

Results

There are 45 students in my two classes and 33 responded to the survey which is around 73%. Among these, 8 (24%) are male and 25 (76%) are female. Every year, there are always more females than males enrolling in this BEIC program. A Likert’s scale of 1-5 ranging from lowest to highest was used to indicate the respondents’ opinions on each item.

(N=33)

Statements	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. I want the teachers to speak English with me all the time.	4.07	0.71
2. I want to improve my English-speaking skill.	4.75	0.79
3. I want to have foreign classmates so I will speak English everyday.	4.71	0.46
4. I want to use English with the teachers in all communication channels.	4.17	0.77
5. I have chance to speak English in this subject.	4.50	0.74
6. I know that English will be useful for my future job.	4.85	0.44
7. I want to speak English in every subject in this university.	4.39	0.62
8. I like my BEIC program.	4.60	0.56
9. My English is better when I come to study here.	4.42	0.69
10. I like English language.	4.78	0.41

The survey results showed that most BEIC students want to speak English with all teachers all the time ($\bar{x}$=4.07) and they desperately want to improve their speaking skills ($\bar{x}$=4.75). By expressing their desire to have foreign classmates ($\bar{x}$=4.71), it is evident that they aspire to live in an international environment to have the opportunity to speak English consistently. They also wish to communicate with teachers through all channels in English ($\bar{x}$=4.17), including written chatting on Line App, which is popular in Thailand nowadays. Students mentioned having the chance to speak English in my two subjects – English Reading for Business 1, for Year 1, and Varieties of English Interactions, for Year 3. Despite these not being speaking-focused subjects, they still prefer that I use English exclusively. Furthermore, students expressed their desire to speak English in every subject at the university level ($\bar{x}$=4.39). This strong signal from students indicates their earnest desire to enhance their speaking skills. Most of them ($\bar{x}$=4.78) indicated that they like English, which is why they chose the BEIC program for their 4-year study.

Results from the Interview

Talking to Teachers

It may sound peculiar to learn that the English teachers do not speak English with students despite the students' strong and obvious desire. Their clear voice is akin to a plea for their teachers. I interviewed five teachers, fearing they might misinterpret my intentions as blaming them. However, these are my friends who have worked alongside me in the program for around six years already. The reasons provided by different teachers are as follows:

"My limited time for teaching and talking to students is the main reason why I prefer to use the Thai language. It allows me to get straight to the point and saves time. I simply don't have the time to engage in casual conversation with students." -- Teacher A

"Students have limited vocabulary and I'm afraid they might misunderstand me when I talked to them in English. I don't want that to happen so I opted to use Thai." – Teacher B

"My subject is the content-based. I tried to explain it in English and the students looked very blank showing that they are confused and they don't understand. I wasted my time and students wasted their time. When I put it into Thai, they smiled. So I know that I must do it in Thai." – Teacher C

"I did not speak English often in the past few years and I lost my confidence already. I can chat with my foreign friends but when I'm in class with Thai students, I cannot overcome my awkwardness speaking English. ...Also, I know that if they want to speak English, they can take a conversation course somewhere during their free time. They don't have to rely on us here." – Teacher D

One Filipino teacher explained that she did not want to study Thai because she is afraid she might one day choose to use some Thai in class and the students will lose confidence in her. *"I want my students to see me using English 100% in class so they are forced to learn speaking and listening with me all the time. They paid a lot of money here so that they can practice English. I don't want to fail them,"* said the teacher.

However, several teachers mentioned that they occasionally request students to present their assignments in English in front of the class. They require the PowerPoint slides to be written in English as well. This practice provides students with opportunities to speak

English nevertheless. Presentations typically occur once or twice per semester, with each student allotted 10-15 minutes to speak English for each assignment

Talking to Students

Students reflected their thinking similar to what we found in the opinion survey. Most of them want the teachers to speak English all the time. They know that English speaking skills will give them a higher chance to get a good job after graduation.

"It is very rare to see Thai teachers speaking English with students. They speak very little in class as they most fear that my friends will not understand. But I personally want all the teachers to speak English with me all the time." – Student A.

"Some classes are difficult. I want the teachers to use English 50% and Thai 50% so I and my friends will understand the content as well. If the teachers speak English 100%, I think half of my classmates will not understand. They come from different background. We have to take care of them too." – Student B.

"When I was in high school, we have English speaking zone. Whoever walk to that zone, they have to use English. It's the fun time for all of us because we love to speak English. But when I came here, there's no English at all. Most Thai teachers speak in Thai. I forgot all my speaking now. Why don't the teachers help us to speak English here?" – Student C.

"I spent a lot of money and time to study English here. I expected all the teachers to use English. I also expect to have chance to speak English everyday. But it is very rare. My expectation is not answered. If possible, I want you to speak English with me all the time. I love English very much." – Student D.

"I am working and studying at the same time. My job requires me to speak English everyday. My boyfriend is not a Thai so I have to use English anyway. I want a degree from here and I don't really mind if some teachers speak English or Thai. But if I can choose, I will prefer English all the time." – Student E.

Discussion

Even if this study aimed to investigate only one purpose -- the students' demand for their English teachers to communicate with them in English -- the research results found several important issues worth sharing with the readers. It provided answers to my

questions: Why do students want their English teachers to speak English with them? Why don't their English teachers speak English with them? Is it a problem for the teachers or the students when teachers don't speak English? What should be the appropriate solutions for both of them?

The opinion survey found that most students want their English teachers to speak English with them so that they have more opportunity to practice speaking. They respect the teachers and have confidence in their teachers' language skills. The interview results from the teachers also revealed that they want their students to have speaking skills. They hope their students can find better jobs after graduation. The reasons they gave for not speaking English is that they are afraid the students won't understand, and they believe it would be a waste of time to speak English with students. It's a difference in mindset that the teachers have. When I asked a follow-up question, *"Can you speak English with students when you meet them outside the class, like in the canteen, so they have more opportunity to practice English speaking?"* The answer was Yes. One teacher said they will do that from now on. I shared the survey and the interview results with them. At least two teachers expressed their agreement to change, as they also want their students to enhance their speaking proficiency.

One student in the interview revealed that there is only one Thai teacher, among 375 in the university, who speaks English with her and her friends all the time. She and her friends sometimes try to find that teacher in his office or the coffee shop so they have a chance to practice English with him. The teacher gives them the opportunity to speak English, they said. Of course, they want to have more teachers like that in their program. They want some teachers to help them with conversation, without passing judgment – someone with whom they can sit down and talk about anything that comes to mind, in English. If the English teachers acknowledge students' preference for acquiring language skills and address that issue properly, language learners will improve their English in a short time. This is in line with Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021), who found that learners' preferences affect their choices, participation, effort, and determination to study the language.

Speaking English in Thailand means more job opportunities and higher income, as the country is a famous hub for tourism and foreign investment. Edgerton (2016) found that workers who can speak English at multinational companies in Bangkok earn 16-23% more than workers in local companies. Many companies also offer additional income to workers

who can pass English tests at a required level. Undoubtedly, English-speaking Thais will have better job prospects in international businesses like the aviation industry, logistics, hotels, restaurants, etc., where foreigners are frequent customers. When BEIC students demand their English teachers to speak English with them, it means they understand their clear future opportunities to speak English in their jobs. If the teachers realize the same thing, they should listen to their students' desperation.

Some interviewed teachers agreed to the idea of engaging in small talks with students in English. Many studies have found that everyday small talks with students in English can help improve students' speaking skills, including fluency, accuracy, and complexity (Hunter, 2012). This proves that the classroom alone is not enough to improve students' speaking skills, especially in classrooms that focus mainly on grammar study like most Thai language classes.

It's not the teachers' fault that their students, especially at the elementary and secondary levels, are unable to speak English. Their aim is to increase grammatical knowledge for students to pass university entrance examinations. Those examinations do not require students to speak English. It's a national-level issue. However, the university is supposed to be the place for honing English speaking skills for students, as they need to speak in interviews and in their jobs. But how can a four-year study with very few English classes help students speak English fluently? It's almost an impossible mission for all language teachers. The answer likely falls on the students themselves, as only those with strong financial resources can afford to attend language schools to practice their English speaking, giving them a better chance at job interviews.

One student said to me, *"Teacher, please speak English with me."* This statement is a desperate plea for English teachers to rethink their language teaching strategies. We need to fulfill their needs. This finding is supported by April & Fahrur (2022), who found that successful learning and activities depend on students' needs, not the teachers' interests. For instance, Sukrutit (2023) found that her students do not like to speak English in front of the class but prefer to speak via video and post on Facebook. When she addressed the students' needs, the results were overwhelming.

Even if this study is small, it has identified a national-level problem. It has also found an answer: that teachers can help their students in a small but powerful way by communicating with them in English as much as possible inside and outside the class. By

immersing the language into their daily lives, students will have more opportunities to speak English every day as well. Additionally, if possible, teachers can communicate with students in English through social media channels. So, English language will not be seen as alien to both parties. Students in this study voiced their demand that they want to speak English with the teachers as much as possible, and it should be for the teachers to listen to that voice. This is in line with the finding by Nunan (1999) that teachers should allow students to take part in selecting their choices in learning. The finding in this study has already shown that choice

Conclusion

The voice of students expressing their desire for their teachers to speak English with them is worth listening to. It represents just the tip of the iceberg, reflecting the fact that their demand has not yet been fulfilled. English teachers should heed their students' voices and find ways to meet that need; otherwise, they will not earn respect from students, and the language teaching and learning process will not be successful. There are various ways to bridge this gap, such as increasing opportunities for English speaking through small talk outside the classroom and allocating more time for English speaking within classrooms. If possible, using English as the medium of instruction and communication is recommended. The benefits will accrue to students when they graduate and have opportunities to secure better jobs and incomes. However, this change in teachers' behavior will only occur when they genuinely care for their students.

Limitation: This study is a small scale involving only one group of 45 undergraduate students. The interview of students and teachers were also conducted in a friendly manner under a coffee environment. Those participating in the interview is familiar with me.

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