Problems and Proposed Strategies for the Enhancement of Speaking Skill for Undergraduate Chinese Students Studying in the Hospitality Industry Program at North Bangkok University

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were: 1) to investigate the speaking skill problems of undergraduate Chinese students studying in the Hospitality Industry Program, and 2) to construct proposed strategies for enhancement. This study employed a mixed-methods approach and was conducted at North Bangkok University. The participants included 1) 27 undergraduate Chinese students, 2) 15 English teachers of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, and 3) 5 teachers and administrators of the Hospitality Industry Program. The data collection was carried out through questionnaires and focus group discussion meetings. Statistical analysis was used for the quantitative data, while the content analysis was applied to the qualitative findings. The results revealed that Chinese students faced speaking problems at a high level, with the mean scores ranging from 4.21 to 4.65. The constructed enhancement strategies were categorized into five aspects: 1) strategies for learners, 2) strategies for instructors, 3) strategies for classroom management, 4) strategies for teaching-learning materials, and 5) strategies for evaluation. These findings should be applied for practical solutions for improving students' English speaking competence in the hospitality program.

Keywords: Speaking Skills, Enhancement Strategies, Chinese Students, Hospitality Industry Program

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in English has become essential in today's globalized world. As the lingua franca for international communication, English proficiency is highly valued across academic, professional, and cultural domains (Willis, 1996; Coury & Carlos, 2001). In particular, speaking skills play a central role in enabling learners to express ideas, attitudes, and emotions, and are critical for success in international business, tourism, and hospitality sectors (McGrath, 2008). In Thailand, English proficiency is increasingly important in both the education system and the labor market. The hospitality industry, a significant contributor to the Thai economy, relies heavily on effective English communication to ensure quality service and customer satisfaction. For foreign students enrolled in hospitality programs, particularly Chinese undergraduates, speaking competence is vital to both academic achievement and future employment opportunities. Despite the inclusion of English courses in university curricula, many students continue to struggle with oral communication. Common problems include lack of vocabulary, weak pronunciation, limited fluency, and low confidence (Chantanont, 2012; Siwayingsuwan, 2015). The issue is especially important because Thailand has become a major educational hub for international students from China. These students face

not only linguistic challenges but also cultural adjustments, which can make speaking English even more difficult. Inadequate speaking skills not only affect classroom performance but also reduce students' readiness to handle real-life interactions in the hospitality workplace. Since this industry demands fast, clear, and polite communication with international guests, the ability to speak English effectively is non-negotiable. Previous research has pointed out the gap between academic training and workplace requirements. Many students can pass written exams yet remain unable to communicate naturally in real situations. This gap highlights the urgent need for systematic strategies to enhance speaking skills. Without targeted interventions, students risk being underprepared for their professional careers. Therefore, research that explores specific speaking problems and proposes practical strategies is both timely and necessary. While prior studies in Thailand and other Asian contexts have identified general difficulties in English communication among students and employees, there is limited research focusing specifically on Chinese undergraduates studying in Thai hospitality programs. Few studies have systematically examined both linguistic and psychological barriers to speaking, and even fewer have proposed concrete strategies that directly connect classroom instruction with professional hospitality demands. This study addresses this gap by combining quantitative and qualitative methods to identify key speaking problems and constructing targeted strategies for improvement. The present study seeks to investigate the speaking problems of undergraduate Chinese students in the Hospitality Industry Program at North Bangkok University and to propose enhancement strategies that respond directly to their needs. By focusing on a specific group of international learners, the study aims to contribute to both the academic field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the practical improvement of hospitality education.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies have highlighted the ongoing challenges in English speaking among learners in Asia, particularly in hospitality and service-related fields. Chenaksara (2005) examined Thai Airways cabin crew and found a gap between training and practical communication needs, showing that many employees lacked confidence and accuracy in real interactions. Similarly, Chantanont (2012) reported that hotel front office staff struggled with fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation despite receiving formal instruction, which limited their ability to provide professional service. These findings demonstrate the persistent gap between classroom learning and workplace communication requirements. Research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emphasized the importance of tailoring instruction to professional contexts. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argued that ESP courses must respond directly to learners' needs and future use of language, while McGrath (2008) highlighted that authentic materials and tasks are crucial for developing practical communication skills. Such perspectives are particularly relevant in hospitality education, where students must be prepared to interact with international clients in real-world settings.

Other studies have pointed out that speaking problems are not limited to linguistic issues but also involve psychological and cultural factors. Willis (1996) suggested that learners' lack of confidence and limited opportunities for real communication hinder fluency development. Coury and Carlos (2001) noted that English is widely used as a lingua franca in international business, yet many learners remain underprepared due to limited exposure. Siwayingsuwan (2015), in her study of tourist police officers at Suvarnabhumi Airport, also emphasized the importance of English in frontline services, underscoring the need for specific training programs. More recent research has reinforced these insights. Richards (2015) stressed that fluency cannot be developed without sustained communicative practice, while Thornbury (2005) emphasized that pronunciation teaching should be integrated with meaningful communication to avoid fossilization of errors. In addition, Goh and Burns (2012) highlighted the importance of strategy-based instruction in speaking, arguing that learners must be explicitly taught techniques to plan, monitor, and evaluate their spoken output. Within the Thai context, several studies have identified barriers to effective English speaking. Kanoksilapatham (2016) pointed out that despite years of instruction, Thai students often lack confidence and accuracy in oral performance. Similarly, studies of Chinese students abroad (Wen & Clément, 2003) revealed that cultural differences and

fear of negative evaluation often reduce their willingness to communicate in English. These findings are directly relevant to the present study, as they underscore the interaction between linguistic competence, cultural adjustment, and psychological readiness. Taken together, the literature indicates that while learners recognize the importance of speaking skills, traditional classroom approaches are often insufficient. A focus on authentic practice, learner-centered strategies, strategy-based instruction, and context-specific materials is essential. These insights provide a strong foundation for the present study, which seeks to identify the problems faced by Chinese undergraduates in a hospitality program and propose strategies that respond directly to their academic and professional needs.

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were: 1) to investigate the specific problems in English speaking skills experienced by undergraduate Chinese students in the Hospitality Industry Program at North Bangkok University and 2) to construct and propose effective strategies for enhancing these speaking skills, with an emphasis on practical applications that align with the professional demands of the hospitality industry.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants

The participants of this study consisted of three groups, namely 1) the first group included 27 undergraduate Chinese students enrolled in the Hospitality Industry Program during the first semester of the academic year 2025, 2) the second group comprised 15 English teachers from the Faculty of Liberal Arts, who were responsible for teaching English courses to students across various programs, and 3) the third group involved 5 teachers and administrators from the Hospitality Industry Program, who provided additional insights into curriculum requirements and the practical needs of the hospitality field. These participants were selected to provide diverse perspectives on both the problems faced by students and the strategies suitable for improving their English speaking skills.

Table 1: Participants' Information

Group	Number of Participants	Role/Position
Undergraduate Students	27	Chinese students in Hospitality Program
English Teachers	15	Faculty of Liberal Arts
Teachers/Administrators	5	Hospitality Industry Program (management/teaching)

4.2 Research Instrument

The two main research instruments were: 1) a questionnaire was employed for the investigation of problems of speaking skill of undergraduate Chinese students studying in the Hospitality Industry Program . All items in the questionarire were evaluated by the three specialists for the suitability and correctness in terms of the index of Congruence (IOC) . All the items were found in the IOC of 0.66 and 1.0, meaning the questionnaire was suitable for the data collection , and 2) a set of questions for 3 focus group discussion meetings was used for the evaluation and approval of the proposed strategies for the enhancement of speaking skill of undergraduate Chinese students studying in the Hospitality Industry Program at North Bangkok University. The proposed strategies were then evaluated for its suitability and correctness by the three specialists through the content analysis method.

4.3 Data Collection

Data collection for this study was conducted in two main stages. In the first stage, questionnaires were distributed to the 27 undergraduate Chinese students enrolled in the Hospitality Industry Program. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended

items designed to measure their self-reported difficulties in speaking English, including aspects of vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and confidence. The closed-ended questions used a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in order to quantify the level of speaking problems, while the open-ended items allowed participants to elaborate on their personal challenges and experiences. In the second stage, focus group discussions were organized with the 15 English teachers and 5 teachers and administrators of the Hospitality Industry Program. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was moderated by the researcher. The sessions were designed to explore participants' perspectives on the speaking problems identified by students and to solicit suggestions for practical strategies to enhance speaking skills. All discussions were conducted in English, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed for analysis.

The combination of questionnaires and focus groups enabled triangulation of data, ensuring both breadth and depth of understanding. The quantitative data provided measurable insights into the level of speaking problems, while the qualitative discussions added rich details about the causes of these problems and potential strategies for improvement.

4.3 Data Analysis

1) For the data and information from the questionnaire concerning problems of speaking skill of undergraduate Chinese students studying in the Hospitality Industry Program The data and information collected were analyzed and then interpreted and presented in terms of frequency court, percentage, mean, standard deviation (S.D.). In addition, the information and data from the 3 focus group discussion meetings were analyzed through the content analysis then used for the evaluation and approval of the proposed strategies for the enhancement of speaking skill of undergraduate Chinese students studying in the Hospitality Industry Program at North Bangkok University. 2) For the approval of the enhancement strategies for English speaking skill: The data information concerning the strategies were collected, interpreted and presented through the content analysis technique

5. Findings

5.1 Problems of Speaking English

The analysis revealed that the speaking problems of undergraduate Chinese students were found at the highest level. Specific difficulties included vocabulary limitation, pronunciation problems, fluency issues, grammatical errors, and lack of confidence. Mean scores for these problems ranged from 4.21 to 4.65, indicating a consistently high level of difficulty.

Student comments also supported these results. For example, one participant noted, "I often know the word in Chinese, but I cannot find the English word quickly when speaking." Another explained, "I am afraid to speak because I worry about pronunciation mistakes." Teachers confirmed these observations, with one stating, "Students hesitate to join discussions because they feel their grammar is not correct, and this reduces their confidence."

Table 2: Mean Scores of Speaking Problems

Problem Area	Mean Score	Level of Difficulty
Vocabulary Limitation	4.65	High
Pronunciation Issues	4.48	High
Fluency	4.36	High
Grammatical Errors	4.28	High
Lack of Confidence	4.21	High

These results demonstrate consistent difficulties across all aspects of speaking.

5.2 Strategies for the Enhancement of English Speaking Skill

Based on the findings, the proposed strategies were organized into five categories:

Table 3: Proposed Enhancement Strategies

Category	Key Strategies
Strategies for Learners	Self-directed learning, active participation, technology-assisted practice
Strategies for Instructors	Supportive classroom environment, constructive feedback, interactive teaching
Strategies for Classroom Management	Group discussions, role plays, pair work
Strategies for Teaching Materials	Authentic hospitality materials (dialogues, menus, reservation scripts)
Strategies Evaluation	Formative assessments, oral presentations, feedback-based evaluations

Based on the findings, the proposed strategies were organized into five categories: (1) strategies for learner, (2) strategies for instructors, (3) strategies for classroom management, (4) strategies for teaching-learning materials, and (5) strategies for evaluation

Overall, the results show that Chinese undergraduate students in the hospitality program face significant challenges in all aspects of English speaking. The most severe problem was vocabulary limitation, followed closely by pronunciation and fluency issues. Grammatical errors and lack of confidence also hindered communication, although to a slightly lesser extent. The findings further indicate that solutions must be comprehensive, addressing both classroom practices and learner motivation. The results clearly demonstrate that the students' speaking problems are widespread and deeply rooted, requiring more than traditional classroom methods to address. The strategies identified through this study offer a framework for practical interventions that involve learners, instructors, classroom practices, instructional materials, and evaluation methods. These conclusions support the development of targeted programs to improve English speaking skills in hospitality education and confirm the importance of aligning language learning with real-world professional requirements.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the challenges faced by undergraduate Chinese students in the Hospitality Industry Program at North Bangkok University and proposed strategies for enhancing their English speaking skills. The findings revealed that problems such as limited vocabulary, weak pronunciation, lack of fluency, grammatical errors, and low confidence are significant barriers to effective communication. These difficulties not only hinder academic learning but also limit students' ability to perform confidently in real-world hospitality settings. The analysis highlighted that linguistic challenges were strongly linked to psychological barriers. For example, students reported that fear of mistakes and embarrassment often prevented them from speaking in class, even when they had sufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Instructors observed similar behaviors, noting that hesitation and anxiety reduced students' willingness to communicate. These findings suggest that language improvement must go hand in hand with confidence building and the creation of supportive learning environments. The strategies proposed in this study emphasize learner-centered approaches, interactive classroom practices, authentic materials, and continuous assessment. Role-playing, pair work, and group discussions can provide students with safe spaces to practice real-life communication, while feedback from teachers can help them gradually build confidence. Integrating hospitality-related materials such as hotel check-in dialogues, restaurant service interactions, and customer complaint handling tasks can make classroom practice directly relevant to professional demands. Performance-based assessments, such as oral presentations and role-play evaluations, can also provide more accurate reflections of students' speaking ability than written tests alone. Beyond the classroom, the findings carry significant implications for curriculum development and institutional policies. Universities offering hospitality programs should ensure that English

courses are aligned with the specific communication needs of the industry. Administrators should encourage collaborations with hotels and tourism organizations, offering students opportunities for internships and workshops that expose them to authentic communication contexts. Professional development for instructors is also essential to equip them with updated methods and resources for teaching speaking effectively. At the theoretical level, this research contributes to the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by demonstrating how language instruction can be adapted to the needs of a specific professional domain. It reinforces the idea that language learning is not only about mastering grammar and vocabulary but also about developing the confidence and communicative competence required for workplace success. The study also shows the value of mixed-methods research in capturing both measurable trends and personal experiences, providing a more holistic understanding of students' challenges. In conclusion, improving English speaking skills among Chinese hospitality students is a complex but essential task. It requires a multifaceted approach that addresses linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and contextual factors simultaneously. By implementing the recommended strategies, institutions can better prepare students for both academic success and professional readiness in the hospitality industry. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of bridging the gap between classroom instruction and workplace expectations, ensuring that students are not only proficient in theory but also confident and capable communicators in practice.

7. Discussion

The results of this study confirm that Chinese undergraduates in the hospitality program face serious challenges in English speaking, a finding consistent with earlier research in similar contexts. The most significant problems identified were vocabulary limitations, pronunciation difficulties, and fluency issues, with grammatical errors and lack of confidence also contributing to communication breakdowns. These problems mirror those found in Chantanont's (2012) study of hotel staff and Chenaksara's (2005) study of Thai Airways crew, suggesting that learners in service-oriented professions often struggle with the same fundamental aspects of oral communication. The persistence of these challenges points to systemic issues in how English speaking is taught and practiced in academic programs. A key factor influencing these problems is the lack of authentic communicative exposure. Many students rely heavily on textbook learning, which does not adequately prepare them for the fast-paced, unpredictable nature of real conversations with international guests. This is consistent with Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) argument that English for Specific Purposes should be based on learners' future needs rather than traditional classroom structures. The absence of sufficient real-world practice reduces students' confidence, which in turn limits their willingness to take risks in speaking. This cycle creates a barrier to fluency development. The strategies proposed in this study respond directly to these challenges. For learners, activities such as peer discussions, self-practice, and role-playing can help build confidence and increase active speaking time. For instructors, shifting from lecture-based teaching to interactive methods—such as group work, debates, and corrective feedback—can foster more meaningful speaking opportunities. Classroom management strategies, including small-group speaking tasks and supportive environments, are essential to encourage participation, especially for students who are shy or anxious. Authentic teaching materials, such as role-play dialogues, multimedia resources, and case studies from the hospitality industry, make learning more relevant and practical. Finally, continuous assessment through performance-based tasks ensures that students' progress is monitored in real communicative situations rather than abstract tests. Another important discussion point is the role of culture and psychology in speaking difficulties. Many Chinese students are accustomed to education systems that emphasize accuracy over fluency, leading to hesitation and fear of making mistakes. As Willis (1996) argued, focusing excessively on correctness can hinder natural language production. In the context of hospitality, however, fluency and the ability to interact naturally are often more important than grammatical perfection. Therefore, strategies must not only address linguistic competence but also aim to change attitudes and reduce anxiety. The findings of this study have implications beyond the specific case of North Bangkok University. They suggest that hospitality programs across Asia,

where large numbers of international students are enrolled, may need to rethink their approach to English language teaching. Integrating ESP principles, authentic practice, and supportive learning environments could better prepare students for international workplaces. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of collaboration between English teachers and hospitality program administrators to ensure that language training is aligned with industry needs.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to improve English speaking competence among Chinese hospitality students. First, students should be provided with increased opportunities for authentic practice. This can be achieved through role-playing, simulations, and group discussions that replicate workplace situations. For example, simulated hotel check-in scenarios or restaurant service dialogues can give students the chance to practice in realistic contexts.

Second, instructors should adopt more learner-centered teaching approaches. Instead of focusing heavily on grammar and memorization, teachers should encourage interaction, critical thinking, and problem-solving in English. Professional development workshops for instructors can help them integrate communicative language teaching methods and hospitality-specific materials.

Third, classroom management strategies should foster supportive environments where students feel comfortable speaking without fear of mistakes. Confidence-building activities, peer support systems, and constructive feedback can help reduce anxiety. Instructors should also encourage students to reflect on their progress and set personal speaking goals.

Fourth, the integration of teaching-learning materials directly related to the hospitality industry is highly recommended. Using real hotel manuals, restaurant menus, service scripts, and case studies ensures that students develop vocabulary and expressions relevant to their future work. Multimedia tools such as videos of professional interactions can also enrich learning.

Fifth, evaluation methods should move beyond written tests to include performance-based assessments. Oral presentations, role-play assessments, and interactive tasks provide more accurate measures of students' speaking abilities. Regular formative assessment can give both students and teachers insights into progress and areas needing improvement.

Finally, collaboration among students, instructors, and administrators should be strengthened. Institutions can create partnerships with hotels and tourism organizations to provide students with internships or guest speaker sessions that expose them to real-world communication. Administrators should support these initiatives by allocating resources and ensuring curriculum flexibility.

Together, these recommendations form a practical framework that addresses both the linguistic and psychological dimensions of speaking problems. If consistently applied, they can significantly enhance students' English communication skills, thereby improving their academic performance and professional readiness.

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