What Hinders English Speaking in Thai EFL Learners? Investigating Factors that Affect the Development of their English Speaking Skills[1]

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Abstract

Speaking skills help students to articulate and express their knowledge, feelings, thoughts, and ideas. In many situations, language proficiency is socially judged through productive skills, especially speaking. This paper examines the factors that hinder English speaking competencies of students at Nakhon si Thammarat Rajabhat University (NSTRU) Thailand. A convenience sample of thirty participants consisted of eighteen students from a Demonstration School and twelve from a Business English program in the same university. Data were collected through a questionnaire and participant observation. The results indicate that educational stakeholders, including administrators, curriculum designers, policymakers, teachers, and parents, should raise their awareness of these obstacles, help the students to overcome these factors in English language learning, and seek countermeasures to develop students' speaking skills.

Resumen

Las habilidades de expresión oral ayudan a los estudiantes a articular y expresar sus conocimientos, sentimientos, pensamientos e ideas. En muchas situaciones, el dominio del idioma se juzga socialmente a través de habilidades productivas, especialmente al hablar. Este documento examina los factores que obstaculizan las competencias de habla inglesa de los estudiantes de la Universidad Nakhon si Thammarat Rajabhat (NSTRU) de Tailandia. Una muestra de conveniencia de treinta participantes consistió en dieciocho estudiantes de una escuela de demostración y doce de un programa de inglés comercial en la misma universidad. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de un cuestionario y observación participante. Luego, fueron analizados mediante análisis de contenido cualitativo. Los resultados revelaron que el desarrollo de las habilidades para hablar de los estudiantes se vio afectado negativamente por factores particulares que incluyen 1) métodos de enseñanza 2) un entorno infantil con falta de exposición al inglés, 3) miedo a cometer errores gramaticales y falta de vocabulario, y 4) una preferencia por los profesores de inglés nativos sobre los no nativos. Los resultados indican que las partes interesadas de la educación, incluidos los administradores, los diseñadores de planes de estudios, los encargados de formular políticas, los maestros y los padres, deben concienciar a los estudiantes sobre estos obstáculos, ayudar a los estudiantes a superar estos factores en el aprendizaje del idioma inglés y buscar contramedidas para desarrollar las habilidades de habla de los estudiantes.

Introduction

Speaking skills are very important as they enable learners and individuals to communicate their knowledge, ideas, thoughts and beliefs. Fair or not, people judge others' language proficiency based on their speaking ability (Adubato & DiGeronimo, 2002; Hamilton, 2013). Speaking skills are productive skills, which refer to "the ability to articulate sound using specific language in oral communication" (Jesa, 2010, p. 10). Another definition of English speaking skills is "the ability to share information fluently and accurately, including the ability to choose appropriate vocabulary and structures in all contexts" (Nanthaboot, 2014, p. 11). The development of speaking skills is affected by interrelated factors such as: linguistic factors (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar), psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, shyness, motivation, and fear of making mistakes) and environmental factors (e.g., teachers' feedback, peers' reaction or laughter, and topics of speaking) (Abrar et al. 2018; Hughes & Reed, 2016; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). The exploration of the factors that hinder the development of students' speaking skills has been researched and studied extensively, yet few studies could be found about the Thai EFL context, particularly the southern part of Thailand. This study is significant as it investigates why a group of Thai EFL learners avoid communicating with others in English inside and/or outside the class and what are the factors that hinder the development of their speaking skills.

Since 2105 and especially after Thailand joined the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the English language has been given higher priority and importance. New paradigms and criteria were implemented to improve the students' speaking skills as the graduates would guide the future of the Thai economy. The pressure has become stronger on schools and universities to improve graduates' speaking skills, particularly after all the AEC members agreed to use English as the official language for business and communication.

Teachers and administration officials do their best to help students to improve their speaking skills. However, very few students take the initiative to engage in conversation and/or communicate in English outside the classroom. Previous studies (e.g., Akkakoson, 2016; Khamkhien, 2010; Noom-ura, 2008; Pattanpichet, 2011) have attributed the inability of Thai EFL learners to develop their speaking skills to some factors that hinder the progress of their language abilities in a direct or an indirect way (e.g., teaching method, environment, teachers' role, the student's shyness about their accent, the fear of making mistakes, students' anxiety, lack of motivation, and lack of exposure to the language). However, these factors cannot be generalized for all Thai EFL learners as there are some demographic differences between the Thai students in the rural and urban areas. Nakhon si Thammarat is located in the southern part of Thailand.

Thai students, like other EFL learners around the world, learn and use English as a foreign language and inevitably encounter some challenging factors. Pawlak & Waniek-Klimczak (2014) state that "speaking ability can be seen as much more difficult for some students than other skills because there are many factors (e.g., age, motivation and context in which the language is learned) that affect the growth of their speaking skills" (p. 143). In this study, the term "factor" refers to challenges (e.g.,"unqualified teachers, poorly-motivated students, learners of mixed abilities in large classes and rare opportunities for students' exposure to English outside the classroom" that affect the evolvement of the students' speaking skills" (Noom-Ura, 2013, p. 139). The main purpose of this research was to investigate and expound the factors that hinder the development of the Thai EFL learners' English speaking abilities at NSTRU, Thailand. It examined the impact of teaching and learning methods, environment, students' English proficiency, and preference of Thai or foreign teachers on the development of their speaking skills. To be more specific, the present study attempted to answer the following research questions: Why do Thai university students not engage in English conversation with others? What are the factors that hinder the development of the participants' speaking skills?

Literature Review

Different researchers have investigated and tried to explain particular factors that challenge the evolvement of Thai students' speaking skills. This section will shed light on EFL in the Thai context and the factors that affect the speaking skills of Thai EFL learners.

EFL in the Thai Context

According to Cheshire (2014), "the status of English in Thailand has been that of a foreign language" as it is not dominant in the local context. "It is mainly used in the academic settings and the workplace" (Chuenchaichon, 2014, p. 2). But since the second half of twentieth century, the status of English in Thailand has changed. It is playing important roles in education, tourism, commerce and industry. Parviainen, 2013) reports that "around 10 % of all the Thai people or approximately 6.5 million are English speakers" (p. 102). They use it to assert the identity of their English, communicate and understand other Englishes. "ThaiE with its distinctive features is an emerging variety of world Englishes" (p. 102). In schools "English has become a part of the curricula from primary school to university level" (Prescott, 2009, p. 188). Approaches and methods of teaching have been modified to fit the Thai students' needs and context. Therefore, the Thai students, especially those who want to get jobs or further their education in or outside Thailand, are required to take proficiency English tests (e.g., TOEIC, TOEFL or IELTS) (Ellis, 2016). The position of English has been altered also for teachers, educators and academics in Thailand and is no longer viewed from an EFL perspective. They approach it as a globally useful recourse with a broad lingua franca function.

Factors that Affect Speaking Skills of the Thai EFL Learners

EFL learners in many countries, including Thailand, encounter different challenges when it comes to the productive skills. Jindathai (2015) examined the factors that affected speaking skills of the Thai students at TNI and found that "the problem of class management, the students' lack of exposure to use the language, fear of making mistakes and the negative attitude towards English language, were the main factors that affect negatively the students speaking skills" (pp. 345-347). Sunitisarn et al. (2017) similarly addressed the factors that affect speaking and listening abilities of the Thai students at Ratchathani University and realized that the students' "speaking skills were affected critically by their lack of vocabulary" (p. 861). The lack of vocabulary urges the students "to use body language" instead of oral production (p. 862). Some other writers, such as Littlejohn & Hicks (1996), Fountaine (2003) and Boonkongsaen (2013) connected the lack of fluency to the deficiency of thoughts and expressions. In other words, the EFL learners first think in their mother tongue and then "translate what they want to say and thereafter learn how to say those things in English" (Littlejohn & Hicks, 1996, p. 142). Sunitisarn et al. (2017) assert that one of the factors which negatively affect students speaking skills is "thinking first in Thai and then translating into English" (p. 862).

Additionally, Ramadan (2018) explains, the fear of making mistakes, class atmosphere, and the teachers' feedback are also perceived as significant factors that affect the students' speaking skills. He further elaborates, that these factors become more effective in the context of large classes in which the students avoid speaking English as they fear to lose face. Instead of being laughed at by their classmates, they prefer to keep silent. The diversity of English GE classes (i.e., students from different majors are grouped to study in one classroom) increases students' reluctance to speak English or participate in English class activities as they feel shy of students from other majors. Another factor is teachers' feedback. Positive feedback enhances students' confidence and encourages them to speak and volunteer in class activities, whereas negative feedback discourages the students, lowers their confidence, and further dissuades them from participating in class activities (Horn, 2008; Jamshidnejad, 2020).

Moreover, Paakki (2013) explains that Japanese and Finnish EFL learners' speaking skills are affected negatively by many causes, especially the lack of vocabulary. Similarly, in the Thai context, Ambigapathy et al. (2014) asserted that the majority of students at Ramkhamhaeng University Thailand "could not communicate effectively because of their limited vocabulary knowledge and uncertainty about grammatical usage" (p. 125). The students became despondent as they could not say what they wanted to say but had to say what they could due to their limited knowledge of vocabulary. Their inability to remember and use the vocabulary in real life situations due to the lack of enough practice is another challenging factor (Paakki, 2013). Besides the students' self-confidence, anxiety, feedback, pronunciation, fear of failure, and the use of their mother tongue as a tool of instruction are also considered as vital factors that negatively affected Thai EFL learners' speaking skills (Tuan & Mai, 2015; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Soureshjani & Riahipour (2012) found that the students speaking skills are affected by some factors such as the teachers' reactions to the students' behavior in the class, discrimination among the students, favoritism, the inappropriate selection of teaching tools, and the teachers' method of correcting student mistakes.

Method

Research context

The present study investigated factors that affect the development of students' speaking skills at Thammarat Rajabhat University (NSTRU), Thailand. NSTRU was established in 1975 as an institution for teachers' training. Currently, the university contains a Demonstration School for primary education in both English and Thai programs and five faculties (i.e., Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, Science, Management Science, and Industrial Technology) to offer undergraduate and post-graduate courses. The students learn English from both native and non-native English speakers including Thai teachers. The university and its five faculties and schools are under the authority of The Office of Higher Education Board. It offers both a five-year bachelor degree program in English Education and a four-year program of Business English. All the university students are required to take five optional English courses: (i.e., Integrated English Skills, English for Daily Life, English for Communication, English for Application and English for Working Skills). They are also required to pass an English exit exam or other proficiency test, such as the TOEIC. Despite the great importance given to English, students are still shy and passive when it comes to volunteering or engaging in discussion or speaking activities inside or outside the classroom.

Participants

The participants were selected according to the criteria of willingness to volunteer, studying English in regular classes, availability at the time of filling out the questionnaire, easy accessibility, having neutral attitudes towards English language, and having knowledge and experience in studying English at NSTRU. To avoid any biases, the researchers did not prioritize any particular students whilst selecting the sampling group. The questionnaire was administered to the participants who met the above stated criteria. There were thirty participants: 18 Demonstration School students (DSS) (three each from grades 1-6) and 12 Business English students (BES) from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (three each from years 1-4). The ages of the DSS ranged from 7-12 while those of the BES ranged from 18-23. (See Appendix 3). A convenience sampling strategy was employed for the sake of obtaining neutral results and a clear idea about the factors that affected the participants' English speaking skills. The criteria were stipulated by the researchers themselves as all the participants were their students. For participant observation, the researchers observed the students who were taking General English courses from the five English courses which all the students had to take and finish during their undergraduate programs.

Instruments

A questionnaire and participant observation were employed to collect the data.

Questionnaire.

The questionnaire was inspired by the dimensions and findings of the quantitative instruments reported by Soureshjani and Riahipour (2012), Noom-Ura (2013), and Jindathai, (2015) who similarly investigated the challenges of speaking skills of EFL learners. It was revised by language experts in the field to assess and enhance its validity, scope and focus. The questionnaire included 23 questions with four domains: teaching method (7 items), learning environment (6 items), participants' English proficiency (5 items), and preference for Thai or foreign teachers (5 items). This uneven distribution of the items in each part was determined by the importance of each section to the achievement of the research objectives.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was also utilized in the present study to examine the context of English language learning at NSTRU. It was selected particularly to collect qualitative data as it "allowed for greater rapport, better access to informants and activities and enhanced understanding for the phenomena investigated" (Musante & DeWalt, 2010, p.93). The researchers are lecturers at the same university collected the data inside the classroom and in the real life situations. The researchers included participant observation in order to examine how the students were practicing and using the language inside and outside the classroom. In other words, participant observation was employed to investigate how the NSTRU students studied and used the language either in the classroom setting or in the real life situations. It was also used to examine the factors that negatively affected the development of their speaking skills.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through the questionnaire and participant observation. First, the researchers asked for permission from the Director of the Demonstration School and the Head of the Business Education program to get access to the participants. Second, the 30 participants were selected according to the criteria stated above. Third, orientation (i.e., information about the research and procedures of confidentiality for the participants' responses) was given to DSS participants and staff who controlled access to the students. Fourth, the researchers gave all of the participants a set of printed questionnaires. All the participants marked the answers themselves, but, the researchers assisted the DSS participants due to their ages by explaining every item of the questionnaire. In contrast, the BES participants did not need assistance, they read, understood and filled out the questionnaire by themselves. Finally, all the responses were collected and prepared for analysis.

The researchers conducted the participant observation from January to May 2019. The researchers focused their observation on the students' speaking ability or reflection of their learning process. They took into consideration the students' willingness to initiate an English conversation and/or get involved in English activities inside the classroom. While observing, the researchers took notes manually in a special notebook for observation. They used an observation guide to focus on the purpose of the research, observation simple, direct and easy for analysis. The guidelines for participant observation were roughly designed first and then modified while collecting the data. The first draft of the guidelines was predetermined based on research questions. They were utilized to remind us what to observe (e.g., the factors that affected the development of the students speaking skills). After getting these ideas, guidelines were modified to focus on related issues such as the overuse of the Thai language in the English classes, the students' lack of vocabulary, the impact of the teachers' feedback and the students' lack of confidence. As participants (i.e., teachers) we observed the subject of our research in the real life situations within the university campus and inside the classes we teach. Outside the classroom, students met with English-speaking teachers who do not speak Thai every day in the canteen, at the daily Let's Talk Activity, and even at the library, the food market near the university or even in the corridors, yet they avoided engaging in any English conversation. The Let's Talk Activity is an optional daily activity which is organized by the Language Center at NSTRU. In this activity, the foreign teachers are available to talk about student-selected topics. The aim of this activity is to encourage the students to use the language outside the classroom settings.

Most students avoided intentionally engaging in any English conversation in class or during any activity. Researchers noted down some speculations about why and any techniques (code-switching or code mixing) that they usually used to communicate with the teachers. After that, researchers transferred the observation data from their notebook into Microsoft Word and prepared it for content analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

The quantitative data collected for this part were analyzed by simple counts (i.e., percentage). Including numbers through 'quasi-statistics' in a qualitative study assists the researchers to support their claim (Erickson, 2002). According to Maxwell (2010) incorporating numbers in qualitative research is advantageous as it "contributes to the internal generalizability of qualitative researchers' claims. It enables you to identify and correctly characterize the diversity of actions, perceptions or beliefs in the setting or group studied" (p. 478). Integrating quantitative data can "help you to identify patterns that are not apparent simply from the unquantitized qualitative data, it adequately helps you to present evidence for your interpretation and to counter claim that you have simply cherry picked your data for instances that support these interpretations" (p. 479). To clarify, the current study employed a percentage count which allowed us to compare and expound the factors that critically affect the students speaking skills. The researchers reviewed students' responses and then converted their responses into numbers giving 1 for yes and 0 for no. Thereafter, the researchers calculated the students' positive as well as their negative responses for each question and then divided them to get the percentages.

For the qualitative data collected through the participant observation, the researchers utilized qualitative content analysis in order to look for the factors that negatively affect the students speaking skills. During the process of data cleaning, the observation notes were organized into categories that would fulfill the research objectives. They were cleared to be readable in "some way to identify recurrent events, themes and explanations" (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014, p. 385). Then the researchers read the notes from beginning to end with the intention of familiarizing themselves with the data and then identifying emerging themes which were related to the factors that negatively affected the evolvement of the students' speaking skills. Those themes were grouped again and only the salient ones were reported in the findings, according to the research objectives. The emerging themes were grouped and associated with the major findings obtained from the quasi-statistics.

Results

The key research objectives were to discover why the students at NSTRU avoid engaging in English conversation with others and to examine and expound the factors that negatively affect the evolvement of students' speaking ability. Accordingly, the data revealed patterns in students' answers that helped address these objectives. The simple quantification exposed three factors that substantially affected students' speaking skills. These factors were the teachers' excessive use of Thai language, the lack of exposure to adequate English usage as their parents were unable to speak English with their children, and the students' English proficiency, including the fear of committing grammatical mistakes and the lack of vocabulary. These factors are examined in detail in the following paragraphs.

Factor 1: *The students' speaking skills were affected by the teachers' excessive use of the students' mother tongue in the English classes.*

The data shows that the students speaking skills are critically affected by the teachers' excessive use of the students' mother tongue in the English classrooms. This impairs the students' pronunciation, as they do not get enough exposure to the language.

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do your teachers use role-play for teaching English in the class?	16 (89%)	2 (11%)	12 (100%)	0 (0%)
2	Do you use Google translation or social media apps to help you to speak English?	17 (94%)	1 (6%)	11 (92%)	1 (8%)
3	Do your teachers always speak English during the class?	17 (94%)	1 (6%)	11 (92%)	1 (8%)
4	Do your teachers explain in Thai when you do not understand English?	9 (50%)	9 (50%)	11 (92%)	1 (8%)
5	Do you use body gestures when you cannot speak some words in English?	12 (67%)	6 (3%)	11 (92%)	1 (8%)
6	Do your teachers use different activities such as games to make you speak good English?	16 (9%)	2 (11%)	11 (92%)	1 (8%)
7	Do your teachers give chances to talk during the class?	17 (4%)	1 (6%)	11 (92%)	1 (8%)

Table 1: Method of teaching

As shown in Table 1, item number 3 the excessive use of the Thai language is one of the demotivating factors that hinder the growth of the students speaking skills. The data reveals that the teachers in the

Business English program (BEP) use Thai language in the English classrooms 92%o f the time and in the Demonstration School (DS) 50%, giving insufficient exposure for the students to the language. Exposure here means getting enough vocabulary, correct pronunciation and real experience of using the language.

The qualitative data similarly confirms the same finding as the researchers observed: that there are some Thai teachers who rarely use English in their English classes. They try to help the students to understand content especially in huge and diverse classes. However, the over-use of the students' mother tongue weakens the evolvement of the language productive skills primarily the speaking skills. This makes their English classes like other Thai subjects, as it was recorded that:

> Some Thai teachers use Thai language in the English classrooms up to 70-80 % and 30 -20 % English. They justify using Thai language that they want to simplify and help the students in the big and diverse classes to understand the content of the course. (Observation, March 1st, 2019)

The teacher plays significant role in the students' attitude towards a particular subject either positively (to make them love it) or negatively (to make them hate the subject). The data reveals that the students' preference for the teacher matters and it is one of the factors that negatively affects their speaking skills.

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do you like learning English with Thai or foreigner teachers?	Foreign = 13 (73%) Thai = 5 (27%)	0 (0%)	Foreign = 9 (75%) Thai = 3 (25 %)	0 (0%))
2.	Do you think learning with foreign English teachers make you more fluent?	16 (89%)	2 (11%)	10 (89%)	2 (11%)
3.	Are you brave to speak with foreigners who are not your teachers?	10 (56%)	8 (44%)	10 (83%)	2 (17%)
4.	Do you think being young makes you less fluent in English ?	9 (50%)	9 (50%)	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
5.	Would you like to speak English more fluently?	16 (89%)	2 (11%)	12 (100%)	0 (0%)

Table 2: Thai and foreign teacher preference

The data in Table 4 shows that 73 % of the DSS and 75% of the BES prefer to study with foreign teacher rather than with Thai teachers. The data reveals that 89 % of the DSS and 89 % of the BES believe that studying with foreign teachers will make them more fluent in English.

The qualitative data closely show that:

> In the daily Let's Talk Activity, the students always register to talk with foreign lecturers only in order to practice the language and/or get some illustrations if they have any difficulty. They believe that practicing the language and studying with foreign lecturers will improve their speaking skills as they speak only English; unlike the Thai teachers who constantly use code mixing and/or code switching in their English classes or in the causal interactions with the students. (Observation, February 15, 2019)

Factor 2: The development of the students' speaking is negatively affected by the students' lack of enough exposure to language at home, as their parents cannot speak English.

The data in Table 2 reveals that students speaking skills are affected by the lack of exposure to the language, as their parents cannot speak English. The use English at home is one of the factors that induces the students and grants them confidence and enough chance to practice the language in the school.

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
8	Do you speak English with your friends?	9 (50%)	9 (50%)	8 (67%)	4 (33%)
9	Do your parents speak English to you at home?	6 (33%)	12 (67%)	1 (8%)	11 (92%)
10	Do you speak English with your teachers outside the class?	12 (64%)	6 (33%)	12 (100%)	0 (0%)%
11	Have you ever spoken with foreigners besides your teachers?	13 (72%)	5 (28%)	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
12	Do you watch English movies or listen to English songs to practice English outside the class?	15 (83%)	3 (17%)	12 (100%)	0 (0%)
13	Which language do you use most, Thai or English?	English = 3 (16.6%) Thai = 15 (83.66)	0 (0%)	English = 3 (25%) Thai = 9 (75%)	0 (0%)

Table 3: Environment

In Table 2, the data show that the students' English speaking ability was unfavorably affected by the lack of opportunities to practice English at home due to the educational background of their parents who were farmers with limited formal education. Item number 9 shows that 67 % of the DSS and 92 % of the BES do not speak English with their parents as their parents cannot speak English. This limits the students' chances to practice and use English to the classroom settings only.

The qualitative data obtained from observation also indicated that most of the students at NSTRU come from remote areas and even it their parents could speak English, they would be with them very rarely. During school terms they reside in the university's dormitories and they are surrounded by people who always speak Thai. Hence, the qualitative data reveals:

> Most of the people here in Nakhon Si Thammarat province are famers hence to find parents who can speak English is very difficult. This limited the students' exposure to the language and made them shy and hesitant to be involved in classroom activities. They prefer to be passive even they know the answer and can state it clearly. (Observation, March 15, 2019)

Factor 3: Students prefer to be silent as they fear making mistakes and do not have enough vocabulary.

Another factor that affected the growth of the students' speaking skills was their English language proficiency. The students were afraid speak English as they feared making mistakes. The data also revealed that the students do not have enough vocabulary.

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
14	Do you have enough vocabulary to talk about the topics: family, study, hometown etc..?	12 (67%)	6 (33%)	7 (58%)	5 (42%)
15	Do you use Thai when you cannot speak English in the class?	13 (72%)	5 (28%)	11 (92%)	1 (8%)
16	Are you afraid of making mistakes about grammar?	10 (56%)	8 (44%)	10 (83%)	2 (17%)
17	Are you confident enough to speak English?	13 (72%)	5 (28%)	9 (75%)	3 (25%)
18	Do you think your English is easy to be understood by others?	12 (67%)	6 (33%)	11 (92%))	1 (8%%)

Table 4: English language proficiency

The data in Table 3 reveals that the students' speaking skills are affected by their fear of making mistakes. Item number 16 shows that 56% of the DSS and 83% of the BES prefer to remain silent as they fear making mistakes. Their fear is connected with the teacher's feedback and the reaction of their peers. This fear is galvanized by the students' lack of vocabulary; item number 14 shows 33% of the DSS and 42% of the BES feel they do not have enough vocabulary to talk about daily life situations.

The researchers observed that:

> The students have the courage to interact with others and want to speak English but the majority avoid to do so because they don't have enough vocabulary to speak about this or that issue. The students initiate the discussion but after few second they will say (Alai wah, pip, pip nakahp) meaning: what is that wait, wait, then they will use their google translate. But with the Thai teachers they will switch to Thai easily. (Observation, March 29, 2019)

The researchers also observed that the students speaking skills were affected critically by their fear of making mistakes. They recurrently observed that:

> The students avoid initiating any English conversation with the teachers or participating [sic] in the classroom discussion due to the fear of making either grammatical or pronunciation mistakes. The fear of the teacher's immediate and/or unsupportive feedback discouraged and urged them to remain passive inside and outside the classroom. (Observation, February 28, 2019)

The researchers observed that the students' fear was intensified by their concern about their peers' reaction to their efforts, especially in big and diverse classes. The qualitative data exposes that

> The students avoid speaking English or be involved in the classroom activities as they fear the laughter of their peers as most of the classes especially the general English classes are heterogeneous classes (i.e., students from different majors study in one class). (Observation, March 17, 2019)

Discussion

The present study investigates and tries to explain the factors that affect students' speaking skills. The data in Table 1 reveal that the teachers use different teaching methods to help the students to improve their speaking skills. Among these methods, is the use of the students' mother tongue which the data substantiates as the first factor that negatively affects the growth of the students' speaking skills. However, the data reveal that the use of the Thai language in the Demonstration School's English classrooms is less

than that in the Business English Program, as we can see in Table 1, making the DSS more fluent than the BES. The possible reason behind this uneven percentage is that all of the teachers at the DS are foreigners and are required to use only English, while at the BEP there are Thai and foreign English teachers. Meanwhile, the use of Thai in the English classrooms is generally accepted in the BEP. Therefore, the DSS are more capable of using English in daily life situations than the BEP students. The DSS are confident enough to interact and engage in an English conversation with others effectively. The BES lack enough exposure to the language as their mother tongue is the dominant medium of instruction and hence remain passive, hesitant and less confident when it comes to speaking English or engaging in any conversation with others. However, some Thai teachers at the BEP justify the use of the Thai language by the factors of having diverse and big classes and it helps students understand more easily.

The use of Thai helps students understand the content of the subject; however, it negatively affects the development of the students' speaking skills. Similarly, Mahboob (2010) states that the use of the students' mother tongue "impedes the students speaking skills" (p. 163). Dana (2016) point out that "using mother tongue might negatively affect students' learning process because it reduces the exposure learners get to the target language and reduces their opportunities for using the target language" (p. 1). The interference of the students' mother tongue according to Lee et al. (2003) "affects the students' pronunciation" (p. 138). It engenders student anxiety and further discourages them from participating in the class or using English in their daily life (Cook, 2001). Therefore, Sullivan (2002) suggests, "everyone should use English. The teacher should avoid the use of the students' mother tongue and confine his own remarks to English even if at the first the students miss much that is said" (p. 22). However, the use of the students' mother tongue and its impact on improving the target language acquisition remains a controversial issue. Song & Lee (2019) in their empirical study found that the "brief switch to the children's L1 was more effective than English-only instruction for vocabulary acquisition" (p.1). They further suggested that "English teachers do need to consider using the L1 when teaching unfamiliar English words, instead of attempting to explain their meanings through lengthy explanation in the EO mode" (p. 8).

The data also shows that the parents' educational background[4] and their ability to speak English is one of the factors that affect the students speaking skills. The data reveals that the DSS are more willing to initiate conversations than the BES because they come from either well-off or better educated families. Their parents are mostly teachers or educated people and that is why they are more confident to speak English than the students in the Business English program. The BES do not speak English with their parents, as they rarely see them and in our cultural situation, they are farmers who have had few opportunities for a good education. This limits the students' chances to practice the language and hence it critically affects their confidence and the development of their speaking skills. Singleton (2014) similarly found that "the students do not understand English well enough since their parents cannot speak English; they cannot help their kids" (p. 102). "Everything about human intelligence and knowledge is acquired first from their own parents and family members. Family is often called the first environment because in this environment children get education, guidance and training" (Malihah et al., 2019, p. 278). In the same vein, Mehdi (1987) explains that "the learning process is significantly affected by a number of factors … within the individual and outside environment which he constantly interacts throughout his life," especially his family (p. 90).

Another factor that unfavorably affects the students' speaking skills is their fear of making mistakes. According to Akkakoson (2016), Thai students avoid engaging in English communication as they fear the "negative evaluation" given by the teacher or "the negative judgment by others" (p. 70). He appends, the feeling of fear about speaking in English intensifies the students' embarrassment and anxiety and consequentially furthers their apprehension about volunteering or involving in English conversation. Similarly, the students here at NSTRU fear the teachers' feedback and their peers' reaction[s] the moment they attempt to be involved or participate in the English class activities. The data indicated that the DSS are more confident to use the language than the BES. The BES admit that they avoid speaking English as they are worried about negative evaluation. The students fear that they will be "interrupted by the teacher or laughed at by their peers" (Azizah & Ciptaningrum, 2019, p. 268). Therefore, the teachers should positively support their students to speak even with mistakes instead of interrupting them with direct overcorrection in front of their classmates. Ching (2019) similarly finds, "the over and immediate corrections hinder the

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[4] The educational background of the parents is well-known at the university. We are very close to our students and know their background and, in some cases, the university provides assistance for those who come from low-income families.

conversation and possibly discourage the students from speaking" (p. 103). Hence, the students prefer to remain passive instead of receiving negative feedback from the teacher.

The students fear is also connected to some other factors such as their pronunciation and the incorrect choice of appropriate vocabulary. Having limited vocabulary obstructs the flow of students' conversation as they become unable to speak about issues that interest them. It hinders any conversation as the students want to say something but do not have the appropriate vocabulary to say it. This urges them to revert to code switching or body language. The lack of vocabulary relatively affects the students' understanding of what the speaker is talking about (Curran, & Petersen, 2017).

The data show that the students speaking skills are affected by the students' preference for teachers (i.e., studying English with Thai or foreign teacher). Both the DSS the BES prefer to study with foreign teachers rather than with Thai teachers. They possibly feel more comfortable to interact with foreign teachers as they only use English. They believe that studying with foreign teachers is better for them especially in improving their fluency in English. Similarly, Songsirisak (2017) in his research about the non-native English speaking teachers and the Thai EFL teachers finds that the Thai students "prefer native English speaking teachers because they have better English pronunciation, provide more opportunities for students to practice the language and better improve their listening and speaking skills, and knowledge of culture of English-speaking countries" (p. 129). He adds, "the students perceived that, the Thai EFL teachers adhered to traditional teaching methods and based their teaching mostly on textbooks" (p. 129). Identically, Anthony and Nutprapha (2016) found that "the Thai English teachers always sit on chair. It makes students lack of interest [sic] and makes very bored atmosphere in class" (p. 45).

Conclusion

This paper investigated and examined the factors that negatively affect the evolvement of the students' English speaking ability at NSTRU. Students studied English as a general and a main subject. The university officials as well as teachers constantly attempted to improve the students' English proficiency. However, there were some factors (e.g., the overuse of the students' mother tongue, the parents educational background, the fear of making mistakes and the lack of enough vocabulary) that critically affected the evolvement of the students' speaking skills. These factors were inferred from the answers of the thirty students who filled a questionnaire and participated in observation. The questionnaire was deliberately divided into four interrelated domains (e.g., method or teaching, environment, English language proficiency, Thai and Foreign English teacher preferences) to give an inclusive view and fulfill the research objectives. Participant observation was also included and utilized as a tool for data collection in order to investigate the factors that negatively affected the development of their speaking skills.

This study could be beneficial to the enhancement of teaching methods to improve students speaking abilities. It showed how the teachers' overuse of the students' mother tongue unfavorably affected the students' pronunciation and confidence to use the language inside and outside the classroom and engage the classroom activities. It projected how the growth of the students' speaking skills were challenged not only by external factors (e.g., environment, method of teaching, feedback and family educational background) but also by internal or personal factors (e.g., the students' lack of vocabulary, anxiety and fear of making mistakes). Therefore, this paper suggests that students create their own environment in which they can develop their speaking skills despite the impediments of the surroundings (i.e., the teaching method, the parents and their peers).

As can be seen, in Thailand, students are often not motivated to learn English. They study English just to pass the exams. However, there are some students who have self-motivation and they develop themselves by reading and do extra curricular activities to improve their English. In other words, all students should rely on their efforts to develop their speaking skills by watching movies and educational YouTube channels, reading English books and taking English massive open online courses (MOOC). One of the persistent challenges of Thai EFL learners, including the students at NSTRU, is the lack of exposure. Hence, the study would suggest that the university should organize more   activities that would compensate the students' inability to speak English at home. If not physically within the university premises they could create special groups on social media that will be mentored by teachers. These virtual groups would expose the students to the language and allow them to practice it freely. Another factor that affects the students speaking skills is the deficiency of their vocabulary. Hence, the study suggests that the teachers who are involved in curricula design should select topics and activities that include the most common words which the students can use and develop their speaking skills. The students' speaking skills were also critically impacted by the

students' fear of making mistakes and the teachers' negative feedback. Thus, the teachers should reconsider the type of feedback they provide. Their evaluations should be supportive and positive even if the students committed mistakes. They should avoid the immediate and intensive correction students' participation or answers. It must be mentioned that the findings of this study may be limited by a lack reliability and inclusiveness due to the small size of the sampling group.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

The Language Center

Nakhon si Thammarat Rajabhat University

Dear students,

First of all, thank you so much for sparing a few minutes of your time to share your valuable thoughts and expertise in measuring the What Hinders English Speaking in Thai EFL Learners? Investigating Factors that affected the Development of their English Speaking Skills The study has two objectives :first, to examine why business English students and students in statit School avoid any English conversation with others inside or outside the classroom and second to investigate what are the factors that affect their speaking skills. All the findings will be used in the present study only .No names or clear indications to the participants will be discloses and all responses will remain confidential

Demographic information

Gender

Male

Female

Other

Year of study

First year   Second year   Third year   Fourth year

Part 1 Method of Teaching

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do your teachers use role-play for teaching English in the class?				
2	Do you use Google translation or social media apps to help you to speak English?				
3	Do your teachers always speak English during the class?				
4	Do your teachers explain in Thai when you do not understand English?				
5	Do you use body gestures when you cannot speak some words in English?				

| 6 | Do your teachers use different activities such as games to make you speak good English? | | | |
| 7 | Do your teachers give chances to talk during the class? | | | |

Part II: Thai and Foreign Teacher Preference

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do you like learning English with Thai or foreigner teachers?	Foreign = Thai =		Foreign = Thai =	
2	Do you think learning with foreign English teachers make you more fluent?				
3	Are you brave to speak with foreigners who are not your teachers?				
4	Do you think you are young that makes you less fluent in English ?				
5	Would you like to speak English more fluent?				

Part III: Environment

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do you speak English with your friends?				
2	Do your parents speak English to you at home?				
3	Do you speak English with your teachers outside the class?				
4	Have you ever spoken with foreigners besides your teachers?				
5	Do you watch English movies or listen to English songs to practice English outside the class?				
6	Which language do you use most, Thai or English?				

Part IV: English Language Proficiency

No.	Questions	Demonstration School Students (DSS)		Business English Students (BES)	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do you have enough vocabulary to talk about the topics: family, study, hometown etc.?				

2	Do you use Thai when you cannot speak English in the class?					
3	Are you afraid of making mistakes about grammar?					
4	Are you confident enough to speak English?					
5	Do you think your English is easy to be understood by others?					

Appendix 2

Format of participant observation

Expected data	Guidelines for Observation	Sample Questions
Demographic data	Predetermined Guidelines * Year of study *Major of study *Age	Predetermined questions
Method of teaching	Predetermined Guidelines Teaching methods Using Thai in the English classes? Using Google translate Role play Teacher feedback	Predetermined questions How do the teachers teach English in the class? How do they interact in the class, do the make overuse of the Thai language in the English classes? How do the teachers convey their instruction? Do they use Google translate to convey their instructions? What type of feedback do the teachers use when the students are participate in the class?
Environment	Predetermined Guidelines Parents education Language to speak with friends Speak with teacher outside the classroom Speak with foreigners	Predetermined questions What is the impact of parents' education on the students' discipline and preparedness in the class? How do they speak English with foreigners?
English Proficiency	Predetermined Guidelines Lack of vocabulary Lack of confidence Fear of making mistakes Code switching	Predetermined questions How do they feel when they speak English? Do they feel afraid of making mistakes affected the students' English speaking skill? How about the issue of Confidence? Is it the issue of confidence that prevents the students from engaging in any English conversation inside or outside the class? *How do the students do when they cannot speak what they intended to say? Is there any relation between the students lack of vocabulary and the continuation of their conversation?

Appendix 3

No	Participants	Number of students	Age range	Educational level
1	Demonstration School students	18	7 to 12	Grade 1 - 6
2	Business English students	12	18 to 23	Year 1 - 4