

# การมีส่วนร่วมในการอภิปรายในชั้นเรียนของนักศึกษาไทย ที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

## Thai EFL Undergraduate Students' Participation in<sup>1</sup> Classroom Discussions

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### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ เป็นการศึกษาการมีส่วนร่วมของนักศึกษาในการอภิปรายในชั้นเรียน (Discussion) ซึ่งเป็นรูปแบบการเรียนการสอนที่ไม่เพียงแต่สร้างโอกาสให้นักศึกษาได้เข้าถึง input ทางภาษา และนำไปสู่ความสามารถในการผลิต output เพียงเท่านั้น แต่ยังเป็นช่องทางที่ทำให้เกิดการพัฒนาทักษะทางด้านความคิดเชิงวิพากษ์ (Critical thinking skill) งานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพนี้ ศึกษาลักษณะการมีส่วนร่วมของนักศึกษาในการอภิปรายในชั้นเรียน และเพื่อศึกษาความคิดเห็นของนักศึกษาในการเรียนแบบ การอภิปรายในชั้นเรียน มีกลุ่มตัวอย่าง ได้แก่ นักศึกษาสาขาภาษาอังกฤษและการสื่อสาร คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยอุบลราชธานี ประเทศไทย จำนวนทั้งสิ้น 25 คน ที่เรียนรายวิชาทักษะการทําวิจัย ซึ่งเป็นวิชาเอกบังคับในหลักสูตร มีขั้นตอนการ ดำเนินการวิจัยโดยการสังเกตการณ์ในชั้นเรียนและการสัมภาษณ์ โดยเก็บข้อมูลการ สังเกตการณ์ในชั้นเรียนจำนวน 8 ครั้ง ครั้งละ 3 ชั่วโมง รวมเป็นจำนวนทั้งสิ้น 24 ชั่วโมง ทั้งนี้ ผู้วิจัยได้สังเกตพฤติกรรมการมีส่วนร่วมของนักศึกษาในการอภิปรายทั้ง ในระดับห้องเรียนและระดับกลุ่มย่อย หลังจากนั้นได้ดำเนินการสัมภาษณ์นักศึกษา จากการสุ่มจำนวน 10 คน เพื่อสะท้อนความคิดเห็นในการเรียนการสอนแบบ

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อภิปรายในชั้นเรียน และนำมาสู่ปัจจัยที่เป็นอุปสรรคของการเรียนการสอนแบบอภิปรายในชั้นเรียน จากการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลพบว่า การอภิปรายในชั้นเรียนกระตุ้นให้นักศึกษาได้แลกเปลี่ยนความรู้และความคิดเห็นระหว่างกัน อย่างไรก็ตาม ระดับการมีส่วนร่วมของนักศึกษาที่มีความสัมพันธ์เชื่อมโยงกับความแตกต่างขนาดของกลุ่มประเภทของคำถาม และประเภทของหัวข้อ รวมไปถึงปัจจัยภายในของนักศึกษางานวิจัยพบว่า ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้สอนกับนักศึกษาและนักศึกษาด้วยกันเอง รวมไปถึงพื้นความรู้ (Background knowledge) ส่งผลต่อระดับการมีส่วนร่วมในการอภิปรายในชั้นเรียนของนักศึกษา

**คำสำคัญ:** การมีส่วนร่วม การอภิปรายในชั้นเรียน การสอนภาษาอังกฤษ

## Abstract

This study aimed to explore undergraduate EFL students' participation in classroom discussions, as they provide not only opportunities for the students' exposure to linguistic input and ability to produce output, but also a platform to develop critical thinking skill. This qualitative research analyzed the nature of students' participation in classroom discussions and examined their reflections on the discussions. The participants were 25 undergraduate students majoring in English and communication at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand. These students took a mandatory course aiming to develop their research and critical thinking skills. The data was collected through classroom observations and interviews. Eight 3-hour class meetings were observed in their entirety and analyzed for characteristics of the students' participation in both whole class and group discussions. Later, ten students were randomly selected for interviews, which sought to understand the students' experiences in discussions. The analysis shows that classroom discussions encouraged students to share their understandings and thoughts on lessons. However, the degree of students' participation in classroom discussions was related to different

characteristics including class size, question type, and topic of discussions as well as students' individual differences. The findings also suggest that student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships and students' background knowledge contribute to the degree of engagement in classroom discussions.

**Keywords:** participation, classroom discussions, English language pedagogy

## Introduction

In Thailand, English is the only foreign language required as a compulsory course in the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551. Thai students have to study English for at least 12 years from the first grade to high school. However, not many students are successful in learning English. According to the results of the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET), the average score in English for the academic year 2017 for Grade 12 students was 28.31 out of 100 percent. The low average score was similar to the results from the academic years 2014 to 2016 (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2019). This reveals that Thai students struggle with learning English.

Another result of Thailand's English proficiency was disclosed worldwide by the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) organized by Education First, a world educational organization. In 2019, Thailand was ranked 74th out of a total of 100 non-native English-speaking countries. Thailand had a score of 47.62, which was classified in the lowest score range (Education First, 2019). For years the country has been at a low and very low proficiency range. Interestingly, for seven out of nine years between 2011 to 2019, Thailand would remain in the very low proficiency range. These proficiency rankings have shown that Thai students have been struggling with English for a long period of time. This

raises concerns about the state of teaching and learning English in Thailand.

When it comes to learning English, although many Thai people have studied English for more than ten years (since they are in kindergarten until they graduate from university), they generally do not succeed in English. We can see that English is still a difficult subject for a lot of Thai learners. In my opinion, there is a great need for practical ways of teaching and learning English to improve learners' success. But the reality of English teaching in Thailand is less than desirable. From my point of view, lecture-based teaching, which is used by many classrooms in Thailand is not sufficient for learners. Moreover, many Thai teachers prefer rote learning and memorization (Stone, 2017), which does not draw upon learners' active engagement in the production of language output.

In the field of second language (L2) learning, Krashen (1981) claims that comprehension input is essential for second language acquisition. On the other hand, several scholars and researchers have argued that only input is not sufficient (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001). The output is also needed for successful second language learning. (Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). According to Mackey (1999), Long's interaction hypothesis (1983, 1996) facilitates second language acquisition. Mackey (2012) states that "The interaction approach highly values output that involved learners going beyond their current level of knowledge." Long (1996) also perceived that students' interaction with teachers or peers provides feedback as a useful aspect for language development. To move forward through different stages of learning, students need input, output, and feedback. The way to get there is through interaction with one another in class. Vygotsky (1978), who developed the sociocultural theory of learning known as the "zone of proximal development", proposes that learning occurs when people interact with one another

such as parents, peers, and teachers. He further emphasizes that social interaction influences learners' development. Based on this model of learning then learners can learn not only from the teachers but also from one another as well.

Thai education has been seen as teacher-dominated, in which students have been dependent and passive recipients for years (Kulsirisawad, 2012). Mascolo (2009) states that "Teacher-centered pedagogy is often described as being based upon a model of an active teacher and a passive student." Most classes in Thailand are teacher-fronted and controlled (Hayes, 2008). The traditional ways of teaching and learning English tend to be one-way communication-- teacher to students. English language teaching (ELT) in Thailand usually prioritizes classroom methods and materials (Hayes, 2010). While students can gain the linguistic input necessary for the language learning process, input alone is not sufficient for language learning to take place. I believe that classroom discussion is one of the means of instruction that facilitates two-way communication. Ewens (2000) defines the term discussion as "a diverse body of teaching techniques that emphasize participation, dialogue, and two-way communication." Discussion develops critical understanding, self-awareness, appreciation for different perspectives, and ability to take action (Brookfield & Perskill, 1999). Learning in discussion-based pedagogy requires students to be more than passive recipients of knowledge (Witherspoon, Sykes & Bell, 2006). In classroom discussions, students have opportunities to speak and share their understanding with their classmates. A main challenge is that encouraging students to actively participate in classroom discussions can be a difficult task. It is not a surprise then that students' participation in the college classroom is frequently found to be low (Weaver & Qi, 2005).

Scholars point out several aspects that can affect student's participation in EFL classrooms. For example, Mustapha, Rahman, and

Yunus (2010) found that lecturer traits and classmate traits play important roles in encouraging and discouraging students' participation. Moreover, student-to-student relationships in terms of friendship in the classroom facilitate learning skills; working together with friends would work more effectively because they know each other well (Hartup, 1992; Blatchford & Baines, 2010). Background knowledge is also one of the aspects reportedly influencing student participation in the classroom. Prior knowledge can either facilitate or hinder learner's connections in acquiring new knowledge. If the prior knowledge is active, sufficient, appropriate, and accurate, it helps to learn new knowledge. On the other hand, if the knowledge is inactive, insufficient, inappropriate, or inaccurate, it hinders learning (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010).

Additionally, Bui (2014) found that topic familiarity influences students' performance in the L2 classroom. Based on the study, students produced longer accounts on familiar topics. Previous studies therefore suggest that class discussions as a form of participation or engagement in the learning process have long been of interest to second language scholars. However, the reality of English language teaching in Thailand seems to lag behind current second language acquisition theory. This has sparked my interest in exploring this topic and examining an English language classroom in which discussions are encouraged and to see whether any insights can be gained and discussed in terms of the second language learning process.

## Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do students participate in classroom discussions?
2. What are the students' perspectives toward classroom discussion?

## Methods

This section discusses in detail the research participants, instruments, procedures, and data analysis as follows.

### Participants

The participants were students who took a course aiming to develop the students' critical thinking and research skills. The course covered the types of research, topic selection, literature review, research questions, research proposal, data collection, data analysis and synthesis, and research report. It was a mandatory course for students majoring in the English and Communication Program, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani. In the second semester of 2019, there were two sections of the course. I observed a section with 25 students. In general, the teacher initiated classroom discussions and assigned students to discuss topics related to the contents of the lesson in groups. The teacher usually spoke English to the class. She sometimes used Thai to give explanation or translate her messages. She sometimes used Lao as well. On the other hand, the students used Thai, Thai-English switching, English, and Lao respectively. In the following findings section, I provided excerpts that were translated in English. However, to keep EFL classroom context, I use brackets for verbal interaction in Thai and parentheses for nonverbal interaction and to complete messages. Italicized text in the brackets referred to technical terms, words or phrases that were spoken in English. I focused on students' participation in both group discussions and whole-class discussions. Of these 25 students, ten students were randomly selected for an individual interview.

### Data-collection procedure

Two main research methods used were class observations and interviews. The observation started in the eighth week of the course.

When I was in the class, I took notes and recorded audio of the student discussions. Discussions occurred when the teacher or student asked and answered questions. The participation was collected from teacher-to-student and student-to-student verbal interaction. I observed each 3-hour class in its entirety and analyzed the characteristics of the students' participation in both whole class and group discussions. In group discussions, I moved occasionally when each discussion session was done.

After the class observations, I randomly selected ten students for interviews about their perspectives on classroom discussions and their participation in them. I made an appointment with each student for individual interviews. The interviews took about 40 to 60 minutes for each student. The interviews were in Thai and sometimes technical terms and English words emerged. Each interview started with warm-up questions. Then I asked the students about their participation in classroom discussions. To gain students' reflection on participation and reasons that could affect their engagement, I also used stimulated recall interviews as a method. The stimulated recall is defined as "a form of introspective inquiry that has been employed extensively in education research, primarily as a means of investigating individuals' concurrent thinking during specific past events" (King, 2016). I collected the data by note-taking and sound recording which were approved by the participants.

## Data Analysis

I analyzed several aspects related to classroom discussions including the degree of students' participation, language choices, signs of the learning process, and paralinguistic in classroom discussions. However, I emphasized the degree of students' engagement in this article. The data of students' participation in classroom discussions was

analyzed from the notes and transcribed sound recordings from the observations and interviews. Based on observations, the ways that the students participated in classroom discussions were analyzed through the different sizes, question types, and topics of discussions. I examined students' interaction in whole-class and group discussions, students' responses to close-ended and open-ended questions. I also focused on student's participation in different topics as I divided them into three types, namely, course content-related topics, topics not directly related to course content, and grammar and language usage-related topics. Additionally, I consulted with an experienced researcher in the process of data analysis.

Furthermore, the data from the interviews were analyzed by focusing on how students perceived classroom discussions and their participation in them. For example, I analyzed how they estimated their participation in both whole-class and group discussions, what they liked or did not like about taking part in the discussions, what they were concerned about when having discussions, which topics encouraged and discouraged participation in classroom discussions from their perspective. Additionally, I identified the participants by using pseudonyms for students with English letters such as student A, student B, and student C. The pseudonyms were used in both observation and interview findings.

Next, I discuss the research findings based on the degree of students' participation in classroom discussions.

## Findings

This section discusses the observation and interview findings. The findings on the degree of students' participation in classroom discussions were related to different sizes, question types, and topics of discussions.

Degree of students’ participation in classroom discussions

Based on the observations, I found that the degree of students’ participation in classroom discussions was related to the different sizes of discussions, types of questions, and types of topics as shown in the Table 1 as follows:

Table 1 The categories of students’ participation

Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Whole-class discussion</li><li>- Group discussion</li></ul>
Question types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Close-ended question</li><li>- Open-ended question</li></ul>
Topic types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <i>Course content-related topics</i></li><li>- <i>Topics not directly related to course content</i></li><li>- <i>Grammar and language usage-related topics</i></li></ul>

The table shows the categories of students’ participation in classroom discussions that were examined. The following data revealed that the students participated quite differently in different group sizes, which are discussed in detail below.

Participation in different size

The following section provides the ways in which students participated differently in different sizes of discussions in terms of numbers of participants. The sizes of the discussions were separated into two groups: whole-class and group discussions.

**Participation in whole-class discussions.** In whole-class discussions, students participated at different levels. The participation in the whole-class discussions was mainly through teacher-student

interaction. The teacher regularly asked questions and the students' opinions on any topics which were either directly related or not related to the course contents. Therefore, the student's answering and sharing ideas in response to those questions show the students' verbal participation in this regard. I found that the degree of students' participation in this type of discussion was slight. Answering questions promptly rarely occurred in the class. In the whole-class discussions, the teacher frequently asked questions to the entire class. Then the teacher waited for the students' responses. Apparently, the students could not answer the questions promptly. If nobody provided any answers, the teacher continued to explain and gave some examples until she got an answer from any of the students. They generally took time to think about the topics being discussed, and only some students answered the questions. Moreover, answering out loud in the class was not common. Many students answered questions quietly like they were simply talking or whispering to themselves. Murmuring occurred from time to time during these discussions. Some of the students either verbalized their answers or discussed them with their classmates sitting beside them, but they did not answer the questions directly to the class.

While the teacher generally asked the class several questions, students' participation in terms of asking the teacher questions was only occasional. When they did ask, I noticed that the students' questions that were asked in the class were only related to the contents of the lesson. The following excerpt occurred when the teacher lectured on qualitative sampling methods. The class was discussing different types of sampling methods in qualitative studies: purposive, convenience, snowball, and quota. While the teacher was giving a lecture on the last sampling method-- quota sampling-- one of the students raised his hand and asked a question as follows:

## Excerpt 1

Teacher: Now, any questions?

Student A: [Teacher.]

Teacher: Yes.

Student A: [How big of a *quota* can we use?]

Teacher: [It depends on you. We have to think that if we have multiple *quotas*, the number of *participants* will decrease.]

Then the teacher gave some examples of conditions that the students should be concerned about when considering quotas for research.

The excerpt above shows that the students asked the question loudly and directly to the teacher. It occurred after the teacher concluded the topic of stratified sampling and she asked if the students had any questions. The question was about using quotas related to the content the teacher had previously taught.

Another excerpt below was a question which occurred while the class was discussing an appropriate research question if they would like to know which of the two main singer contestants was more popular: *E-Ka* or *Durian*, on *The Mask Singer* TV show, a popular celebrity singing contest in Thailand. The class also discussed methods that could be used to get data. At first, the discussion was in small groups. Then the teacher asked each group what the research question should be, what data-collecting method should be used, and what the sharing of the results of their discussions with the entire class should be.

## Excerpt 2

Teacher: What method are you going to use, *random sampling* or *stratified sampling*?

The students turned to one another after the teacher asked the question.

Student A: *Random* (whispering to the group members)

Student B: [Can *convenience* (sampling) be used?]  
(whispered to the group members)

Student B: [Can *convenience* (sampling) be used?]  
(asked the teacher)

The two excerpts above show that both students asked questions directly related to the course contents which were being discussed at the moment. Moreover, their questions demonstrated their understanding of what was being discussed. According to the first excerpt, the student asked about quota sampling to expand his current understanding. The example also shows that the student understood what random, stratified, and convenience sampling methods were. When the teacher gave her two choices, she did not choose one of them. She asked the question if she could use another type of sampling method instead.

In summary, students' participation in the whole-class discussions was to a limited degree. For the most part, the teacher started each discussion and asked many questions to the class. However, the students' engagement was inconsistent. Answering questions promptly and loudly was rare. However, I found that students' participation in small group discussions was different from the whole-class discussions. The students normally engaged well in their group discussions. I will discuss the nature of students' participation in group discussions as follows.

**Participation in group discussions.** Students' participation in group discussions tended to be livelier than the whole-class discussions. In my estimate, participation in group discussions was moderate. Group discussion was an activity in which all group members were engaged. When the teacher assigned students to make a group of three to five

people and discuss any topics together, they talked with other members of their groups and expressed their ideas regularly. All students participated in their groups at different levels whether the group was chosen by the students themselves or randomly assigned. Nonetheless, students' participation differed in these two types of group assignments. When the students grouped independently to discuss topics, friendliness to one another was apparent during their discussions. They discussed and talked to each other freely and smoothly in their groups. By contrast, when the students were in random groups, their participation was more academic. All group members gave their ideas and strictly focused on the task assigned.

Based on my interviews, although the teacher was not the focus on this study, asking the students to reflect on her helped me to understand how her presence interacted with their participation. Interestingly, all of the students interviewed said that they never initiated a question or asked the teacher questions in class. For instance, Student P reported, "When I had a question, I kept it to myself. I asked my friends. It was surprising that I did not ask the question to the teacher directly." One of them was surprised by the fact she was afraid to ask the teacher even when she regarded the teacher as easy-going. Despite the fact that whole-class discussions occurred quite frequently, most of the participants reflected that their participation in the whole-class discussion was mostly limited.

Participation in group discussions allowed the students to reflect on their classmates. Most of them reported that they participated more when they discussed with those they considered friends. For instance, Student T reported that when he was grouped independently with his friends, he talked much in each discussion, and he could sometimes talk about something else beside the topic which was being discussed.

Another interesting point was that some of the students perceived that having discussions with members in random groups increased their participation and helped them to express ideas well. Student P reported “For me, I preferred random groups. The groups which I chose myself, what should I say? When my close friends had already given their ideas, I did not give mine or argue them. It was because we knew each other well, our ideas sometimes similar to each other, so I did not give my opinion.” She further reported that “In the random group, the members of the group did not know each other well. It encouraged us to give and argue ideas with other members independently. I also felt if I argued with my close friends, I may dissatisfy them.”

All interviews above pointed out that the degree of participation depends on others in the class as well. The teacher and their classmate seemingly influenced participation in classroom discussions. Moreover, in group discussions, their friendship with group members seemed to have influenced their participation as well.

In addition to this, the size of the classroom discussion based on the number of students engaged interplayed with the degree of students’ engagement. Participation of the whole-class and group discussion was at a different degree as discussed in the next section.

### **Participation in different question types**

In the classroom discussions, the types of questions that were asked in the class could be divided into two types: close-ended and open-ended questions. The degree of students’ engagement was related to the two types of questions as discussed below.

**Close-ended questions.** The students were able to answer close-ended questions promptly. In the excerpt below, the whole class was discussing the definition and examples of the term *Variable*. The teacher

gave some examples and asked them if they thought each example could be considered a variable.

### Excerpt 3

Teacher: [*Variable*, what does it mean?]

Students: (Silence)

Teacher: [Can weight be a variable?]

Students: [Yes.]

Teacher: [Can colors be variables?]

Students: [Yes.]

Teacher: [Can schools be variables?]

Students: [Yes]

Teacher: [Can provinces be variables?]

Students: [Yes.]

Teacher: [Can regions be variable?]

Students: [Yes.]

The excerpt above shows that several students responded to the close-ended question promptly. When the teacher asked close-ended questions or give them choices, they always responded and the silence rarely occurred in this type of question.

**Open-ended questions.** Silence occurred when the teacher asked open-ended questions. The students tried to answer the type of questions after the teacher gave them clarification and encouragement.

### Excerpt 4

Teacher: What would be a benefit of an oral questionnaire?

Students: [We provide convenience.]

Teacher: [Apart from convenience, what else?]

Students: (Silence)

Another excerpt below shows that the students answered a question after they were encouraged by the teacher to try to answer the

question. It occurred when the class was discussing quantitative analysis. The teacher asked the students why a strong claim was important. The teacher started asking the question in English, then translated it in Thai and ended up with encouragement in Lao.

#### Excerpt 5

- Teacher: Why do you want to make a strong claim?  
 Students: (Silence)  
 Teacher: Why do you have a yes/a no question?  
 Teacher: (Continued) [Why do we need *claims*? Tell me.] (Ended up by switching to Lao)  
 Students: [To make it clear and reliable.]

Furthermore, when the teacher kept asking questions and opinions about lessons and course content, it became apparent that the students struggled with expressing and clarifying their ideas. The teacher regularly answered the questions herself after getting no answers from the students. The following excerpt took place when the class was discussing the benefits and drawbacks of collecting data by using a questionnaire. After the class finished discussing a drawback of using questionnaires, the teacher asked the class about the challenge of using the said method.

#### Excerpt 6

- Teacher: What is the challenge of a questionnaire?  
 Teacher: [It is different. It is not the *drawback*, but the *challenge*. What is the challenge?]  
 Student: [Challenge] (gave Thai meaning as a verb)  
 Teacher: As a noun.  
 Student: [Challenge] (gave Thai meaning as a noun)  
 Teacher: Yes, it is. [What is the challenge of using *questionnaires*?]  
 No one answered the question

Teacher: [It is not the *drawback* but it is a challenge.  
What is it?]

No one answered the question

Teacher: So basically, you have to carefully  
...[unintelligible], look questions, you have to  
carefully verse your questions, aware they are  
not loaded, they are not misleading, they are  
easy to understand. They are clear...

Then the teacher continued explaining the challenge of  
using questionnaires to the class.

Apart from silence, when students were asked open-ended questions, they answered with short words or phrases. In the following excerpt, the teacher asked a question of whether the students have recognized questions in the university's evaluation system.

Excerpt 7

Teacher: [Do you remember what the questions  
were?]

Student C: [Teacher]

Student D: [Curriculum]

Student E: [Classroom]

To sum up, the degree of students' participation in classroom discussions was related to close-ended and open-ended questions. The students highly and promptly participated in the discussions with closed-ended questions, whereas there was less participation in the discussions with open-ended questions. Students' engagement increased when the teacher gave more details and examples. Encouragement at the end of questions seemed to stimulate the students' involvement. In the next section, I will discuss the degree of students' participation in terms of different types of topics.

### Participation in different topic types

Based on the contents, I divided the topics into three types, namely, course content-related topics, topics not directly related to course content, and grammar and language usage-related topics. The findings show that different topics were related to the degree of students' participation. The description is provided as follows.

***Course content-related topics.*** Course content-related topics were the topics that were related directly to the lessons and provided in the course packet, such as topics of qualitative sampling methods, qualitative data-gathering methods, data analysis, reporting results/findings. Based on the course packet, the content mainly included definitions, concepts, strengths, weaknesses, comparison of different concepts, and examples of course content related to doing research. In each lesson, there were activities which also included different topics such as raw data from interviews with HIV positive individuals, mock data from an informant recalling a story about her fellow inmate, content analysis of Article 44, and Lamyai Haithongkham's songs.

Based on my observations, topics in discussions at the beginning of each class meeting were directly related to the course content. The teacher usually started with a lecture on concepts of each course content-related topics and asked questions to the class for discussion. I found that the students had less participation in the whole-group discussions when the topics were related to the lesson. That is, they were silent when the teacher asked them about the differences between thematic and narrative analysis even though the class had talked about them previously.

However, course content-related topics that were provided in each activity show a large amount of the students' participation. In each class meeting, students were assigned to discuss and complete tasks in the

course packet. For example, the students were assigned group discussions to see if any themes emerged. One of these involved interview data with HIV positive individuals who were shunned by their community and who had lived in exile in a cemetery. At the end of the group discussion, the students were asked to give a possible theme. I found that every group shared their ideas with the class. Later, the class discussed the most appropriate theme of the example data. I found that both group and whole-class discussions in this activity went very well. Student-to-student and teacher-to-student turn talking were smooth. Hence, a greater degree of students' participation emerged when the students discussed course content-related topics in the final activities after they got background knowledge on each topic from the teacher.

Interestingly, I found that the topics to which the students paid more attention were those involving general issues. Several students participated in the topics that surrounded them as university students or a familiar topic that they heard or experienced before. In one of the class meetings, the students were assigned to make groups of two and choose a research question. They had to discuss methods that they would apply to their chosen research question. There were about 51 research questions provided in the activity. The research questions, which were chosen by the students, were related to customers' motivation to buy drinks from coffee shops, kinds of pets that UBU (Ubon Ratchathani University) students would secretly keep in the dormitory room, controversies in Donald Trump's speech, and reasons why some EC (English and Communication program) students do not wear a uniform to class. Although there were many questions provided, wearing a uniform and motivations for buying a drink were selected twice, each time by a different student pair. The most frequently chosen topics were linked to the students' university, program, and daily lives.

***Topics not directly related to course content.*** There were not only course content-related topics that were discussed in the class. The teacher also discussed some topics which did not appear in the course packet including global situations, Thai society, political issues, social problems, local beliefs, university, and students' university experiences. Each topic was not directly related to the course content. In a class meeting, the class discussed the concepts of validity and reliability. The teacher first asked students to look up the definition of the words "validity" and "reliability". Then the class discussed the concept of validity and the teacher initiated the topic of the Coronavirus outbreak. The excerpt below shows a discussion on the validity of Coronavirus testing.

Excerpt 8

Teacher: Two days ago a Chinese passed through immigration in France, you know while taking some kind of a fever reduction, pain reliever, or fever-reduction medicine. So you take fever reduction medicine, then your temperature is lower, right? And she passes through the temperature detector to check the body temperature of the people passing through to determine whether the person has a fever or not. So, this woman was from China and she was able to pass through the detector without being detected as having a high temperature, but she ended up with Coronavirus in her system. But because she took the medicine before passing through the system...

Then the teacher started asking a question of what the students thought about the fact the temperature detector could not detect the woman's temperature. The question was as follows:

Teacher: [Our question is, if we are *authorities*, *research* in daily life, the *detector* is our instrument. To measure who has a fever, is our instrument *valid*?]

Students: [No.] (murmuring)

Teacher: [Right?]

The teacher concluded that we could not use the instrument because it could not detect people who have or may have Coronavirus. The teacher continued asking the class about the validity of the instrument in the following excerpt.

Teacher: [This means *screening* people who might be detected with the first procedure being measurement of *body temperature* (by the detector) in France, was not *valid*, was it?]

Students: (nodded their heads)

The class kept discussing Coronavirus testing. In the following excerpt, the teacher asked the class whether they knew the testing in Thailand.

Teacher: [Do you see what Thailand does?]

Students: [Yes.]

Teacher: [When Thailand does, there are when Thailand does not do (anything) and when Thailand does (something).]

Teacher: [Do you see the news?] Do you see that? [What do they do?]

Student U: [(I) did not see (how) they do, but (I) knew that they already did (test), (I) knew that (they) have already tested, I just knew that.]

Then the teacher suggested the students try to find more information about Thai testing. Later, the teacher encouraged the class to continue discussing the reason why Thai people had been critical when Deputy Prime Minister and Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul posted on his Facebook that Thailand did not need to install temperature detectors at the airports because all flights from Wuhan, China, had been canceled. The teacher asked the class, as shown in the excerpt below.

Teacher: [Let's use (our) *logic, critical thinking* if (someone) said that it was unnecessary to scan (people at the airports), (because) there were no airplanes, (or) *flights* from *Wuhan*, why do people criticize (that)?]

While some students were giving their opinions, one of the students shared her opinion audibly to the class that the virus could not be spread in only Wuhan was one of the reasons as according to the excerpt below.

Student F: [The virus could possibly have been contracted from elsewhere.]

The above excerpt shows that the students' engagement increased when they discussed topics not directly related to course content. Nonetheless, the students participated differently when the topics

related to their experience and were close to them. For instance, when the class discussed campus life or courses that they had studied in the program, their discussions went smoothly. The student-to-student and teacher-to-teacher responses came out promptly. The excerpt below was a discussion on designing a questionnaire or a survey of popularity. The teacher gave the class a research question of which on-campus coffee house was the most popular among EC students. The details of the discussion are as follows:

Excerpt 9

Teacher: [What do we compare first?]

Students: Coffee houses.

Teacher: [How many coffee houses? Let's count  
how many of them.] How many?

Some students answered the question.

Student A: [Six or seven?]

Student P: [Six.]

Teacher: [Oh! It is countless.]

Then, the teacher went to the point of the survey design.

Teacher: [When we design the survey, what do we  
count? What do we compare?]

Students were murmuring.

The teacher explained that they needed to divide the survey into different sections addressing such topics as the opinions on atmosphere, price, and taste. The class continued the discussion as shown below.

Teacher: [Let's think! If we have to do a survey,  
which coffee house do we vote as the  
number one for the atmosphere?]

Student A: The *Balcony Kiss*. (Other students answer quietly)

Teacher: [For the atmosphere, we may vote for the Balcony as the number one.]

The teacher continued asking the next question.

Teacher: [For price, which coffee house do we vote for?]

Student B: *Chapayom* (Other students were murmuring)

Finally, the teacher asked another question on the design of the survey.

Teacher: [For taste, which coffee house do we vote for?]

For the last question, several students were contributing their opinions, but they were not intelligible to me. They gave confidently different names of coffee houses. Then the teacher explained that the data of this aspect were various because people had different favorite tastes of coffee.

The excerpt above shows that if the topics of discussions were familiar to the students, ones that they could be a part of, such as a UBU student, an EC student, and a customer, the students' verbal participation was clearly high. Their participation occurred promptly and frequently. Unlike the discussions of something that they did not have experienced or they were not interested in, where their participation was limited. Therefore, the familiarity of the topics was related to the degree of students' participation in classroom discussions.

***Grammar and language usage-related topics.*** The last topic was beyond the course content but it generally occurred while the class was having discussions. Grammar and language usage-related topics included

discussions of technical terms, vocabulary, and grammatical points. Pronunciation was also included. When the new course-related content topics were introduced to the class, the teacher regularly asked the class for definitions of words such as *endanger*, *correlation*, *causation*, and *manipulate*. When the students answered questions and shared their ideas, the teacher began discussing grammatical uses such as how to use singular and plural nouns, comparative adjectives, and punctuation. The excerpt below illustrates a discussion of how to use punctuation. Each group was asked to give a research question to examine the most popular singer on a TV show. Several groups gave their research questions with the same preposition *between*, so the teacher started to discuss another option to change the question.

Excerpt 10

Teacher: How are you going to collect data? (Asked a group)

Student A: Our question is who is more popular, *E-Ka Dam* or *Durian*? comma kon (She ended up a Thai word “kon” which meant “before” (to separate clause)

Teacher: Who is more popular? [Then what do we use?] (paused) [That group, what did I tell you if we did not use “*between*”] (the teacher pointed to another group at the back) [did you forget?]

Student B: Among

Teacher: [Which punctuation mark do we use?]

Students: Comma (answered by some of the students)

Students: Colon (answered by some of the students)

Student A: [Colon or semi(colon)?] (talked to friend beside him)

Student B: Colon

Teacher: [It is *colon*. (Someone) still uses a comma.] (She said that while some students kept choosing “comma”).

The teacher added another question.

Teacher: [Then, what do we use (between) *and*, and *or*?]

Several students verbalized both choices audibly. Most of them answered “or” and spoke louder and louder. However, the teacher did not give them the correct answer and she told them to find it themselves.

Furthermore, when the teacher asked them to pronounce some words, they were not confident. The excerpt below occurred when the teacher asked the students how to pronounce the commonly mispronounced word “determine”. She gave an example sentence to the class and the discussion was as follows:

#### Excerpt 11

Teacher: The goal of this research is to de... [what is it?] (She wrote the word “determine” on the whiteboard)

Students: (Murmuring)

Teacher: De...? De...? Deter...? Deter...?

Teacher: Petchy, deter... [what is it?] (Called on a student)

Teacher: Determine (Gave the correct pronunciation)

After the teacher gave them the right pronunciation, the students were laughing. The teacher continued pronouncing other mispronunciation words.

Teacher: determine, examine (the teacher pronounced the final syllable as the possessive pronoun “mine”)

Students: (Laughing)

Teacher: When (you) see this word, undermine. (She pronounced the final syllable as *min*)

Students: (Continued laughing)

I also found that when the teacher introduced the class to new words. Some students repeated the teacher’s pronunciation quietly with him/herself. These actions show that they were not confident to pronounce some words. Therefore, they paid attention to the correct pronunciation and practiced in the classroom.

Moreover, the grammar and language usage-related topics were not initiated by the teacher only. The students also discussed this topic among themselves. In a class meeting, the class discussed methods of reporting findings. The teacher asked the class the importance of examples of findings. A student gave her idea to her friend beside her. The details were as follows:

#### Excerpt 12

Student G: To make our point clear, clearer.

Student U: More clear.

Student G: [*More clear or clearer*]

Student U: Clear.

Based on my observation, when the teacher initiated discussions of vocabulary and grammatical points, the students paid attention. Some of them answered the questions and some took notes on their handout or notebook. The class was not silent when they discussed grammar and language usage-related topics. These topics also appeared in student group discussions. So, discussions of grammar and language usage-

related topics implied the students' awareness of language uses as language learners.

I found that the differences in discussion topics were an important reason for the students' participation or lack of it. The students could participate and talk spontaneously on topics that were familiar to them such as day-to-day activities and so forth. Their participation in discussions was limited when they discussed course content-related topics or academic topics. For example, Student V reported that her participation went down when the class discussed the lessons of the day and her participation went up when the topics were related to something that she knew and experienced previously. She said that "It was because of something that we did not know, (and) were not familiar with. If I saw (something) a lot, I knew a lot. If I knew (something) a bit, my participation through answers and discussions decreases. It decreased our potential because I did not know it." Then, I asked her about the topics that she could discuss to a great degree. She replied, "Talking about the poor, I could imagine. I was one of them. I could imagine clearly. When the teacher talked about the flood, I understood because I was one of the volunteers. I knew their real problems. I knew how they were in the situation. It was because I was a part of the situation. I saw it with my own eyes. I could recall it. So, I was confident when I answered the questions. It was 100 percent sure."

## Discussions

Based on my findings, the degree of students' participation in classroom discussions was related to different characteristics including the size, question type, and topic of discussions. This points to the students' lack of background knowledge, critical thinking skill, and as potential contributors to the degree of their engagement in classroom discussions.

### Participation in classroom discussions

According to the different degree of students' participation in the whole-class and group discussion, student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships affect participation. Whole-class discussions display teacher-to-student relationships and group discussions display student-to-student relationships. As the findings have shown, the teacher-to-student relationship is limited. As I said above, the teacher-initiated discussions where the class was asked several questions, which the students answered, the degree of the students' participation was not consistent in the whole-class discussions. The students sometimes kept silent or gave answers quietly. Based on my interviews, most of the students did not participate much in the whole-class discussions. Voluntary responses to the teacher's questions were rare. Moreover, some students reported that they had never asked or answered any questions in the whole-class discussions.

However, the students' participation in group discussions was prompt and spontaneous either in their chosen or random groups. Based on my findings, all students were involved in group discussions. They shared their understanding with each other. They asked and answered each other's questions. Their turns talking were natural. In addition, closeness among group members seemed to have influenced their amount of participation. Participation in the chosen groups with close friends encouraged them to talk much and independently, but it was difficult for some students to show disagreement with others. Participation in random group discussions provided more opportunities to get different ideas, share their opinion, and debate with others.

Students' engagement in both the whole-class and group discussions shows social interaction in the classroom. Vygotsky (1962) claims that people learn through interaction with others including parents, teachers, peers, and experts. In classroom discussions, the

interaction between the teacher and the students, and students and students, supports students learning through the course. As Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, and Linnell (1996) also stated, “Language learners are frequently and increasingly each other’s resources for language learning.” Moreover, friendship among students in the classroom supports crucial learning skills like cooperation, reciprocity, effective conflict management, intimacy, commitment, and self-disclosure (Hartup, 1992; Blatchford & Baines, 2010). On the other hand, friends usually distract others in classroom engagement (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

### **Lack of background knowledge**

Based on my analysis, different discussion topics garnered different levels of students’ participation. The topics can be characterized as *course content-related topics*, *topics not directly related to course content*, and *grammar and language usage-related topics*. Topics related to the concepts in the handout received the least amount of students’ engagement. Students struggled with topics that they are not familiar with. In terms of the other two topics, students are able to participate promptly. It is probably because the topics are close to their daily life. As language learners, they pay attention to grammar. So, their participation occurs frequently with the grammatical points.

Background knowledge is important for learning because it influences students’ engagement. To follow the content and any topics, students’ knowledge is needed. As the interviewees have reflected, they can participate more in the discussion if the topics are familiar to them. Background knowledge helps to build confidence to share ideas. It is understandable that they are not confident when they have to discuss topics about which they do not have prior knowledge. Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, and Norman (2010) state that students’ background

knowledge can either help or hinder their learning. They claim that students come to the class with their prior knowledge which includes a combination of facts, concepts, models, perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes. Their knowledge may be appropriate or inappropriate for different contexts. The authors further emphasize that if the students have insufficient knowledge for the task or learning situation, it might impede learning new things. Furthermore, Bui (2014) found that topic familiarity encouraged more fluent L2 language.

## Conclusion

The study explored the nature of students' participation in classroom discussions. It also examined students' reflection on classroom discussions. The amount of their participation was related to several characteristics including the size, question type, topic of discussions. Teacher-to-student and student-to-students relationships, lack of background knowledge, and lack of critical thinking skills seemed to influence the ways the students participated in classroom discussions. However, students' participation did not depend on any single aspect. There is no dominant factor. In a discussion, participation can be related to many aspects. Moreover, a student's engagement is based on different reasons at different times. In addition, this study shows that classroom discussion is an alternative way of teaching in the EFL classroom. The interaction between teacher-student and student-student supports the students' learning process. Everybody in the discussion can be a source of learning for each other.

## Limitations of this study

The research study suffers from methodological limitations. The observations were done by myself only, and therefore the study was

limited by ability to gather data from different angles and seating areas in the classroom.

### **Recommendation for further study**

Given the findings in this study, several dimensions should be explored in detail. Further research could examine students' participation as a longitudinal study to see their development. Moreover, students' grade results and teachers' reflection should be examined. Another aspect is doing research on students' using English in EFL classroom and signs of L2 learning process in classroom discussions.

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