

ความชำนาญในการสนทนากำลังคุณของนักเรียนระดับมัธยมและปริญญาตรี ในมุมมองของอาจารย์เจ้าของภาษา

An Evaluation and Viewpoints in Regards to the English Conversational
Competencies of Thailand's Secondary School and Undergraduate
Level Students, and Suggestions for Improvement

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บทคัดย่อ

ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่นักเรียนไทยส่วนใหญ่ เริ่มเรียนกันมาตั้งแต่ระดับชั้นอนุบาล ประถมศึกษา มัธยมศึกษา จนถึงระดับมหาวิทยาลัย ถึงอย่างไรก็ตามถึงแม้ว่าเวลาเรียนโดยรวมแล้วประมาณ 12 ปี ก็ตาม แต่สิ่งที่ปรากฏเห็นได้อย่างชัดเจน คือ นักเรียน นักศึกษาไทย ส่วนใหญ่ยังไม่สามารถสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ ได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ ซึ่งสาเหตุของปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นนั้นมีหลายสาเหตุด้วยกัน อาทิเช่น ขาดการกระตุ้น ขาดแรงผลักดันที่อย่างจะเรียนรู้ ไม่มีเป้าหมายที่ชัดเจน บรรยากาศในห้องเรียนไม่เอื้ออำนวย รวมถึง ความสามารถในการสอนและการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษของครุพัฒน์สอนเอง บทความนี้ได้รวบรวมข้อมูลจาก แหล่งข้อมูลที่น่าเชื่อถือ และยังอิงจากวิชาการสารทางวิชาการ เว็บไซต์ สื่อสิ่งพิมพ์ และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก ของอาจารย์ชาวต่างชาติที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษา อาจารย์ไทย รวมถึงผู้บริหารการศึกษาที่มีประสบการณ์ด้าน การสอนภาษาอังกฤษโดยตรง โดยได้นำข้อมูลและสถิติที่มีมาวิเคราะห์เพื่อหาสาเหตุหลัก ๆ ของปัญหา รวมถึง แนวทางในการแก้ไขปัญหา เนื่องจากประเทศไทยได้ก้าวเข้าสู่ประชาคมอาเซียนและประชาคมเศรษฐกิจ อาเซียน ในปี 2558 ซึ่งภาษาอังกฤษถือว่าเป็นภาษาสากลของประชาคมอาเซียนและเป็นภาษาสากล ที่ทั่วโลกยอมรับ จึงไม่สามารถปฏิเสธได้ว่าหากนักเรียนนักศึกษาไทยจะต้องพัฒนาการใช้การสื่อสารภาษา อังกฤษให้เกิดประสิทธิภาพ บทความนี้ยังสามารถใช้เป็นแนวทางให้ผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสีย หน่วยงานที่เกี่ยวข้อง สถานศึกษา ผู้บริหารการศึกษา รวมถึงครุอาจารย์นำไปปรับปรุงแก้ไขเพื่อสามารถแข่งขันในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ ได้อย่างยั่งยืน

คำสำคัญ : ความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษ แหล่งข้อมูล สถานะเดิม

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Abstract

English is the language that Thai students begin to learn from the beginning of their elementary school years, and continuing through primary, secondary schools up to university levels. However, it appears that after all these years they do not seem to be able to communicate effectively. Certainly, there are many problems which contribute to students' incompetency. It is possible that the problems are from the student themselves, and their lack of desire, motivation and passion to learn, uninspired learning atmosphere, and even more important, the ability of English teachers themselves. To further support the article, various useful sources of information had been analyzed and compiled in order to obtain the facts which could be able to constitute to the finding of solutions on how to improve, and possibly solve English inefficiency. Furthermore, several key methods used in the finding included information from reliable websites, related journals and newspaper articles; interviewing Thai and Foreign teachers and high school students, particularly in Lampang municipalities. Additionally, related data and numbers were also factored in to this study to give readers clearer pictures of the situation. As ASEAN/AEC is approaching, it is essential that Thai students have to improve their English skills in order to be successful and be able to compete in today's competitive environment, domestically and internationally. It also serves as guidelines for evolved stakeholders, responsible agencies and institutions such as government regulators, public and private school administrators/teachers, and of course, students to follow and take notices that the English proficiency levels would not have been improved if we continue to do the same as we had done in the past without daring to change or to simply put it: sticking to status quo.

Keywords: English proficiency, sources of information, status quo

Introduction

This journal is aimed to find out about why there is such a high level of English incompetency of Thai students in general. Moreover, it also suggests on how to improve on their conversational skills corresponding with teachers' roles in supporting students to overcome the incompetency and inefficiency. In supporting this claim, several key data

and figures are also provided to reflect the reality of Thais' poor English skills when compared to other ASEAN counterparts. Additionally, several interviews were conducted with local native English teachers and a Thai English lecturer, whose teaching capacities and responsibilities covering mainly primary, secondary as well as undergraduate levels. The insight attained constitute to better understanding of Thai students' lack of competitiveness in English communication and can be served as a guidance for students and teachers to follow in order to improve on their English. In some ways, this report helps to suggest ways to improve on English competency for Thai students going forward.

Analytical Information

Several methods were used in obtaining useful information in supporting this study. These include engaging in many conversations with several native speaking teachers who are currently teaching English for primary, secondary and collegiate levels, enquiring insight and useful information as well as suggestions on how to better individuals' English competency. In addition, English proficiency indexes, references from relevant articles, journals, reliable websites, and the writer's own experience in teaching English on a full-time basis to undergraduate students and as a part-time teacher for high school students and adults whose overall competency levels range from intermediate, below intermediate to low were also used as part of the analysis.

1. To begin with, an article written by Dr. Orawan Weerawong, Assistant Dean, Faculty of Mass Communication, Srinakarin Wiroj University, had conducted a research study on why English teaching & learning were ineffective taking in to account 12 accumulated years of English learning since primary to secondary levels, though most of them were not able to communicate. Based on her study, the reason was mainly due to "Socio linguistics", which primarily focused on memorizing and learning to pass exams as the core emphasis instead of focusing on speaking. Her finding also added that there had not been any conversational type of exam. Generally speaking, teachers were insisted upon teaching grammar and context reading; memorizing words/sentences structure. Upon her recommendations, teachers must change their mindsets and techniques and put emphasis on teaching conversation as well as learning key and commonly used vocabulary, and at the same time two-way communication and interactions among students and teachers or vice versa should be encouraged and conducted. Moreover, for each written or multiple-choices type of exam, half of it should include a listening test. In

her opinion, the priority of effective learning process should be in this order...listening, speaking, reading and writing. As English speaking is a skill, the more one practices the better one will be. Hence, being shy or afraid to speak, for whatever the reason(s) may be, is the main drawback obstructing learners' learning process to run smoothly.

2. To further support the claim (Tangkitwanit, 2013) said that "overall Thailand's education system is failing our children and its competitiveness due chiefly to lack of accountability system and the overall system doesn't equip students with the skills necessary for modern days living." Additionally, when students are assessed as having poor learning performance, people involved usually show no responsibilities, and when teachers are unable to fulfill their roles in the best teaching practices and its environment, some teachers or administrators response for educational administration, at times, don't take it very seriously and show lack of concern or interest to take action. Furthermore, he believes that Thai students spend too much time in the classroom with teachers instead of following the approach of "teach less but learn more" as in Singapore. Speaking of accountability in the education system, Dr. Somkiat added that schools and teachers should be subjected to 360 degree enforceable performance assessment, so they too are accountable for students' learning process and outcome.

3. Tongaht (2012) he wrote: according to Ministry of Education's educational strategic reform plan for 2007 – 2010, it stated that there were two main problems on learning and teaching English in the primary and secondary levels. The first one concerned teaching with focus on memorizing vocabulary, which did not correspond with students' speaking skill and lack of opportunities to practice speaking outside of classroom. The other problem related to the teachers' inability to teach English as 80 per cent of elementary school teachers did not major in English while in colleges.

For the primary level, the core problem related to students were not accustomed to engaging in conversations, inadequate knowledge of vocabulary, and discontinuity in practicing English.

For the forthcoming ASEAN/AEC in 2015, English capabilities have become an integral part in communicating. It has been approved as the official language of ASEAN/AEC members' countries. Inevitably, in order to successfully compete, ASEAN citizens must acquire good English communicative skills, speaking in particular. Therefore, it is imperative

that Thailand's educational institutions, whether they are public or private, develop students, trainers and personnel to prepare for the upcoming challenges.

English Proficiency Index data: An Undeniable Bitter Truth

English Proficiency Index (source: Education First, EF EPI-2011)

1. Average world proficiency (44 countries global surveyed) 50 – 70 %
2. Average Asia proficiency (12 countries surveyed) 47.54 %

Rankings comparison among some ASEAN countries (source: World English Proficiency Index Measurement) from the survey of 44 countries.

Table 1 Rank and Proficiency Index scores of Select ASEAN countries

Rank	Country	Proficiency Index (%)
9	Malaysia	55.54
34	Indonesia	44.78
39	Vietnam	44.32
42	Thailand	39.41

TOEFL scores

Table 2 TOEFL scores rankings comparison with some of key ASEAN countries

Nos.	Countries	Scores
1	Singapore	98
2	Philippines	88
3	Malaysia	88
4	Indonesia	78
5	Thailand	75

Source: <http://www.asianscientist.com/2011/04/academia/toefl-singapore – worldwide – English – proficiency – top – asia/>

Table 3 English Proficiency Index among Some of ASEAN Peers

Nos.	Countries	Scores	Proficiency Levels
1	Malaysia	55.54	High
2	Indonesia	44.78	very low
3	Vietnam	44.32	very low
4	Thailand	39.41	very low

Source: EF EPI 2011 Report. http://www.ef.co.th/sitecore/_/~/media/efcom/epi/pdf/EF-EPI-2011.pdf

Table 4 Numbers of Population versus Percentage of the Use of English among Key ASEAN Countries

Nos.	Countries	Numbers of Population (Million)	Numbers of People who use English (Million)	Percentage
1	Singapore	4.58	3.25	71
2	Philippines	97.00	49.80	55.46
3	Brunei	0.38	0.14	37.73
4	Malaysia	27.17	7.40	27.24
5	Thailand	63.03	3.54	10.00

Source: Trend of the Use of English in Key ASEAN Countries by Panyathanakoon (2012)

Based on the figures and data shown above, it is obvious that Thai's English proficiency lags far behind when compared to global and ASEAN standards. With the ever increasing of global integration, people, cultures, businesses and society become much more interrelated and connected than before. Hence, improvement in English communication capabilities of Thai students and teachers is a must. It is also advisable that this be supported by better curriculum, new teaching techniques and methods that

designed to fit learners. Teachers must also shy themselves away from the status quo, be willing to accept new ideas and challenges, and be willing to change.

Comments and Suggestions from Interviewing Expats Teachers in Lampang and other provinces

Neil Phillips' (former lecturer, Mahidol University/Nakorn Pathom province; e-mail: njp2553@gmail.com) comments:

1. There is a reluctance of students to try for fear of making a mistake, this being implied to their feelings and perceptions of not wanting/attempting to try as they do not want to lose face, which they afraid may reflect negatively on themselves and on the teachers for not teaching them properly.
2. Teachers tend to put too much emphasis on details of grammar instead of keeping the lessons simple, focusing less on doing exercises and make them fun and lively.
3. There is a reluctance of Thai teachers to seek assistance from native speakers in proof reading prior to printing exams; not to mention seeking help in other communicative related matters.

Richard Mann's (English lecturer, Lampang Rajabhat University; e-mail: rickmann999@hotmail.com) comments:

1. It is believed that the motivation in the past for speaking good and proper English was simply not as strong up until recently due to factors such as the growth in tourism, globalization and the forthcoming launch of ASEAN/AEC. However, this situation should improve over the coming years.
2. Cultural inhibitions may also prevent students from developing their skills in spoken English as teachers are figures of authority and their status can inhibit students, they may afraid to speak out and make errors, an integral part of language acquisition process. Though this can be overcome by employing teaching methods and classroom activities that empower students, develop their self-confidence and help to overcome their natural shyness.
3. Class size: Large class can prove problematic for teachers to develop students' speaking skills. With classes forty or more students, teachers may have difficulty giving the necessary attention to individual students.

4. Lack of practice: Learning within the classroom is important, but is just one part of the language acquisition process. Students need to regularly use the language learnt in the classroom and adapt it to real-life situations. They need to find time and to communicate with native speakers outside of the classroom when given such opportunity, though individuals' willingness, focus and personal efforts play a key role in this regard.

5. Knows adequate vocabulary range: Students must be encouraged to develop good habits concerning vocabulary building by reading more. Students also should be urged to read as much as possible. Ideally, reading things that interest them and at appropriate skill level. Moreover, instant note taking and jotting down new words are needed to keep them handy, and make commitment to memorize them, as well making a conscious attempt to use them would help students broadening their vocabulary skill, thus adding more confident when attempting to speak.

Paradee Aimjirakul (English lecturer, Thammasat University/Lampang campus; e-mail: paimjirakul@gmail.com) she had this to say:

1. It is possible that during students' high school years, classroom lessons and activities were not really focus on listening and speaking skills thus resulting in limited opportunity to truly practice on listening and speaking aspects. As commented by other interviewed teachers, students tend to spend too much time on grammar, doing exercises to pass exams and not enough reinforcement to actually practice conversations whether inside or outside the classrooms.

2. Ineffective and lack of purpose ways of teaching from the early years, these could possibly include things such as lack of dialog practices, lack of in-depth knowledge of the language, lack of proper ways/tools to measure the progress, mispronunciation and/or wrong interpretation by unqualified teachers leading to their regression rather than progression.

Michael Mandigo (English teacher, Boonyawat Withayalai school, Lampang province) added:

1. The main causes of the issue are teachers and curriculums currently used do not properly motivate students or give them lessons/material that they can use in their daily life—that has a practical impact. This may be because most teaching focuses on grammar and not enough time or emphasis is given to creating real-life scenarios where

they can use and practice what they have learned, especially for students who live in remote and rural areas where the access to sources of information and chances to practice are limited.

Lawrence Geller's (English teacher, Laor-Utis Demostration school, Lampang province; e-mail: sawadee2000@gmail.com) insight:

1. Overall, the curriculum development that based on the cognitive ability of students does not correspond with realistic goals or expectations in which teachers tend to focus or worry too much about completing units or chapters assigned instead of taking time putting emphasis on getting the basics such as phonetics, stress, intonation, pronunciation, commonly used tenses and parts of speech) right first before moving on.

2. Realistic goals should be clearly set and measurable for every level from primary to collegiate levels. This can be defined by dividing up skill sets as a part of lesson plans e.g. vocabulary, common grammar/tenses as well as commonly used parts of speech and monitor the progress, analyze the results, and find solution to improve on the area that needs to be improved for each student. In doing so, it will help boosting the students' sense of purpose and relevancy.

David Brown (English teacher/guest columnist) wrote in Bangkok Post/Opinion section, June 3rd, 2013. His comments were:

1. Overall, Thai children lack of reading habits as they only read about 5-6 books per year when compared to Singapore and Vietnam where the figures were about 50-60 books a year. This, therefore, constitutes to their poor English language skills in forming and expressing opinions, let alone forming and speaking proper sentence. This drawback would be enhanced if they read more. In addition, reading is one of the four macro skills along with writing, speaking and listening of languages around the world, and it is essential to proper development of English language competency and confidence.

Roongrut Mongthalay (supervisor of the Secondary Educational Service Area Office 35; email: pebook20@yahoo.com), she pointed out that one of the major obstacles is the compulsory curriculum for basic education used isn't really suitable for the levels of students, plus at times, it appears to lack of meaningful substances and contents that enable students to instill and put into further usage. Moreover, too much time is spent in class without having a chance to practice in real life situations e.g. ordering food,

bargaining for goods, hanging out, answering phone calls etc., let alone an opportunity to interact with native speakers.

Narissara Thanworakul (English lecturer, Lampang Rajabhat University; e-mail: narisara.ttc@gmail.com) shared her opinions: Firstly, she believes many Thai students are overly concerned with grammar when speaking English. Many of them understand what is being said but are afraid of making errors on grammar as it would be embarrassed if they said it incorrectly. Consequently, avoiding being interact and not having to respond. Not to mention lack of opportunities to use English on the daily basis.

Secondly, students should spend more time listening to English language through various sources available. In doing so, hearing the voices would enable them to learn how the English words are pronounced and used in the real contexts. In addition, reading can help improving speaking skill due to the fact that students would be able to learn new vocabulary and take notices of how the proper words are used in the sentences.

Finally, the roles of teachers in her perspectives should be:

1. Provide the time or assign tasks for students to read with different context.
2. Provide the activities and opportunities for students to get involved so they can practice their speaking skill.
3. Try not to intervene when students say something incorrectly, but rather repeat the right version back in order for them to recognize the mistake made. This way should help eliminating and/or reducing the anxiety or nervousness from making grammar mistakes.

In summary of the above viewpoints and comments, the more exposure to the use of English through interactions with other English speakers, varieties of printed media, websites, watching DVDs etc. and of course, the more practices, the better the use of English of the students/learners will be; given they are provided with proper tools, materials, encouraging and supportive environment, and qualified trainers/teachers.

As a person whose English usage began during high school years in the U.S.A and as an English teacher who have taught conversational English for nearly five years. There are several key points and techniques that I have garnered from my own experiences and used as a way to continue to improve my English competency and maintain it at a high level. These are:

1. by engaging students into a conversation as well as conversational contexts. Again, the more students are evolved and engaged themselves into a dialogue practice, the more they are equipped with information, thus boosting their confidence. Also, when teaching conversation, always have back-up lesson plans ready just in case the one that is being used doesn't suit the level or doesn't serve the purposes of learners

2. Learning through real life experiences in which everything starts from listening, trying to grasp key words/points, think and respond based on your understanding. Certainly, not all of my understanding and responses through each dialogue or context were right, but at least a mistake was learnt, corrected and remembered to put into future use.

3. Never be afraid to ask...I had never let a question-marked item or word, went inattentive and without a concrete answer or solution, doubts and vague remain if a question is left unanswered.

4. Teaching English by regularly engaging students into a conversation. The more the learners are being given opportunities to practice the better chance for them to improve. There was also a study by a group of English teachers from Prince of Songkla University indicated that classroom activities were crucial for achievement of listening and speaking skills as they gave learners whole-task practices, thus increased their motivation and created natural learning.

5. Put strong emphasis in pronunciation as one can be good at grammar and syntax etc., however incorrect pronunciation would obviously disrupt the flow of communication and could deter a counterpart away, and could potentially put an end to a conversation prematurely.

6. Taking advantage of available vast tools and wide range of sources offered on websites and social media sites by using them as a tool and/or incorporating them into lesson plans. Many helpful English learning & teaching techniques are available in the Internet. It is only the matter of putting time and effort to use them.

7. Applying and incorporating a sense of humor into lesson plans as well as implying some of the meanings of idioms or slangs, phrasal verbs which often times have different meanings and perceptions in Thai. For examples, “Are you straight?”...does not really mean the person who is being asked is an honest/straight forward person; “You are smart”...does not mean that the person is handsome; “Are you hot?” does not really

mean that the person is sweating because of the heat; “What’s up?”...does not mean an object is on the ceiling or being attached to the ceiling; “Hang on”...does not mean an object is being hung or I like sunset food does not mean a person likes to eat Western food as sunset means Western in Thai or ตำราจบ้าน does not translate to or imply to English as police house as commonly seen on signposts or even on t-shirts in rural villages.

Based on my experience, the above are wonderful ice breakers and work wonderfully every time when used. With laughter being instilled, learners are more engaged and subsequently, creates pleasant learning atmosphere resulting in better participation and cooperation.

As stated by Krashen & Terrell (2000). “In other words, English as a second language is acquired by “Picking up” the language from conversations with others or immersion rather than learned only through teachers’ instruction in a classroom. Language acquisition occurs when children are active and exposed to social environments and when they become emotionally connected to a language, they are more responsive and eager to learn. (Brown, 2000).

A research by Horwitz (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986: 125):

To Horwitz, the foreign language learning process is a unique because learners are required to communicate using a language which they lack of confidence. Students who are inadequate and incompetent in using English as the target language often feel uncomfortable communicating in front of others, mainly due to their limited knowledge of the language. In addition, some students whose fear of negative evaluation or feedback consider language errors as a threat to their image, which often resulting in them being silent, and has tendency to withdraw themselves from engaging in further conversational activities.

A study on foreign language speaking anxiety by Aydin (2008): an examination of foreign language speaking anxiety displayed a correlation between:

- a) Anxiety and fear of negative evaluation
- b) Anxiety and perception and low ability in relation to peers and native speakers

(Aydin, 2008)

Based on the above author's teaching experiences and research, he suggested that teachers should support students with negative perception in learning English as a second language by providing them with constructive reinforcement such as giving them constructive comments and compliments when necessary, and as for learners of perception of low ability, teachers should set up classroom environment with classroom harmony approach and building synergy, thus breaking away from the perception of having to compete, enabling full incorporation and participation among pairs and groups.

Conclusion

To put all of the above into perspectives, overall Thai students are smart and competitive, however, supporting factors are needed in order to help them to improve and progress on their English communicative skills. The balances between teachers' and students' capacities need to be struck in order to ensure that the learning and teaching processes run smoothly and complement one another in obtaining optimum output.

Going forward, it is important and encouraged that teachers be supported with better teaching tools, be efficiently trained by professionals, and put emphasis on listening and speaking with correct grammar, stress and intonation as top priorities, once these key elements have been instilled, reading comprehension and writing can be applied. As teachers and trainers are provided and equipped with the tools necessary as well as qualified personnel that they need, their overall teaching performance should improve, at least to certain extent. However, it is advisable that their ability and output should be judged based strongly on merit, principles and back up by tangible results, chiefly their students' English conversational competency. For students, being able to receive proper input and training with the right tools, techniques and mechanism from teachers, positive output is likely to be achieved.

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ผู้เขียน

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