

Factors Affecting Thai Students' Ability in Learning Spoken English

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15294/elslt.v2i.647>

QRCBN 62-6861-2530-756

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors affecting Thai students' proficiency in learning spoken English, with a comparative perspective between learning contexts in Thailand and Indonesia.

Despite the importance of English for global communication, many Thai students struggle to develop their speaking skills. This study employed a mixed-methods, qualitative descriptive design, involving four Thai students with learning experiences in both countries, and used semi-structured interviews and Likert-scale questionnaires. The findings reveal that both internal factors, such as speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes, and external factors, including teaching methods, communicative activities, and classroom environment, significantly influence students' speaking ability. The study also highlights differences in instructional practices, with more communicative-oriented approaches in Indonesia supporting greater speaking confidence compared to grammar-focused methods in Thailand. The results suggest that implementing communicative teaching strategies, increasing speaking practice, and fostering supportive learning environments can enhance students' speaking proficiency. These findings provide practical implications for improving EFL instruction.

Keywords: *Challenges, Thai students, teaching factors, pronunciation problems, speaking anxiety.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely spoken languages in the world, English is used in professional, educational, and communication settings (Wannaruk & Ambele, 2019). English is an important working language for regional cooperation and communication in the ASEAN region (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Thai students still encounter many obstacles when learning English as a second language. The four language skills, reading, listening, writing, and speaking, are difficult to acquire in an English-speaking setting because of a variety of internal and external influences that pupils unavoidably come across. Effective communication requires the balanced development of these interrelated skills (Brown, 2001).

Furthermore, English is explicitly used for academic purposes in higher education (Tong & Thi Truong Nhung, 2022). English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is particularly important because students must use English for academic writing, presentations, and discussions (Hyland, 2006). In addition, English is increasingly recognized as a universal language that facilitates communication among speakers of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2007). American missionaries introduced English as a foreign language to Thai schools during the time of King Narai the Great (Khamkhien, 2010). Improving Thai pupils' fluency in English remains a significant challenge, despite long-term implementation in the education system. Therefore, enhancing English speaking fluency among Thai students remains a considerable challenge, as previous research has shown that Thai EFL learners frequently face obstacles such as limited exposure to English beyond the classroom, low self-confidence, anxiety about making grammatical mistakes, and instructional approaches that prioritize grammar and reading skills over oral communication (Khamkhien, 2010; Wannaruk & Ambele, 2019; Srikrai, 2008).

Therefore, strategic research into instructional methods is necessary to develop English-speaking skills for Thai

learners and to promote meaningful oral communication in the classroom. However, addressing these issues remains challenging, even though the national education curriculum under the National Education Act No. 2 of 1999 explicitly states that teachers must teach foreign languages to ensure students possess the necessary knowledge and skills to use the language effectively (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022). Furthermore, Thailand's national education strategy emphasizes the value of communicative skills and encourages students to use English as a communication tool in both academic and real-world settings (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). Many Thai students still struggle to develop effective speaking skills despite these efforts, especially in impromptu communication and in-person interactions (Khamkhien, 2010). The difference highlights the possibility that teaching methods and curriculum implementation fall short of meeting the communicative goals specified in the national education policy. This gap could stem from a mismatch between instructional practices and the communicative goals outlined in language education frameworks (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In the context of education or teaching methods for English as a Foreign Language (EFL), which is not a language used in daily life, or simply put, a second language, Thai children face traditional teaching methods. These strategies can slow students' communicative growth because they place greater emphasis on rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar, and on exam preparation, than on practicing communication in authentic contexts (Richards, 2006). Students' limited ability to experience practical English use and meaningful spoken language is a result of teaching strategies and a curriculum that place greater priority on theoretical performance than on communicative practice (Littlewood, 2007). Some schools continue to focus on examination preparation without considering the communicative demands of future global contexts. Instead of promoting classroom engagement and conversational practice, teachers in some areas rely on conventional test-oriented teaching methods due to limited access to current professional development (Sinwongsuwat, 2012). This teaching approach helps students to have a strong understanding of language structure and

grammar. However, students still experience limitations in using the language for fluent speaking and effective communication, which are crucial components of English-speaking skills (Than, 2025). Therefore, they can never use those skills in real-life situations. This situation highlights a long-standing problem in EFL contexts, particularly in Thailand, where English is not used in everyday communication. An examination-focused educational system discourages students from speaking openly and limits opportunities for actual language use in the classroom, according to other studies (Wannaruk & Ambele, 2019; Richards, 2006). Rather than building active communicative skills, learners often acquire passive knowledge of English. Furthermore, the absence of communicative language teaching (CLT) techniques lowers students' self-esteem, heightens their fear of making mistakes, and strengthens the notion that meaningful contact is less significant than grammatical correctness (Littlewood, 2007; Than, 2025). All of this continues to limit students' chances to practice oral communication skills because it makes them indifferent to taking part in speaking lessons. All these challenges show the importance of a method of instruction that emphasizes speaking practice and real-world communication, and must replace teacher-focused, test-driven approaches in EFL education.

Furthermore, another challenge faced by Thai students learning English as a foreign language is the teaching approach that focuses on exam results rather than practical communication. Even with continuous English instruction, teaching methods that emphasize grammatical structures limit opportunities to practice speaking skills through interactive activities such as exchanging ideas and role-playing, or working together to solve problems (Than, 2025). The difference between communicative ability and language-learning experiences reflects the limitations of learning methods that do not support the development of authentic speaking skills. Furthermore, because English is not widely used in daily life, it remains difficult for Thai students to communicate in it. As a result, kids have trouble pronouncing words correctly, lack confidence when speaking, become

nervous when speaking, and have a limited vocabulary. In addition, Thai students' English communication is severely hindered by emotional components, including speaking anxiety, fear of making grammatical errors, and low self-confidence. Anxiety about receiving poor grades from classmates or teachers causes many to avoid speaking exercises, limiting their participation in assigned verbal communication tasks (Khamkhien, 2010). Students' fear of making mistakes is even more intense in classrooms that value accuracy over fluency, further aggravating this anxiety.

Past study data show that Thai learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) continue to face ongoing challenges in developing their English-speaking skills, as speaking English is not just a language skill but also an essential ability affecting educational opportunities, careers, and participation in the global society of learners in ASEAN and international contexts. no matter how much English study experience they have (Wannaruk & Ambele, 2019; Khamkhien, 2010). There are many interconnected factors that contribute to these issues, rather than just the students. These include external factors like assessment systems that prioritize linguistic accuracy over fluency, teaching methods that focus on test results, and a lack of opportunities to use English in real-life situations. Internal factors include speaking anxiety, fear of making grammatical errors, and low self-confidence (Littlewood, 2007; Richards, 2006; Than, 2025). Although competent communicative use is a key component of foreign language instruction in Thailand's curriculum, many institutions still use teacher-centered methods and rote memorization for tests. As a result, students are limited to opportunities for interactive communication and are unable to properly develop their speaking skills (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022; Thomas, 2019). As research on English-speaking difficulties among Thai EFL learners has grown, most studies have either examined speaking difficulties using quantitative measures such as test scores and questionnaires or have focused primarily on school-level students (Wannaruk & Ambele, 2019; Khamkhien, 2010). University students' lived experiences and perspectives of speaking English get little attention, especially in academic settings where speaking English is necessary for debates, presentations, and accessing

scholarly materials. As a result, little is known about how internal and external factors interact to influence the difficulties Thai university students face in learning spoken English.

Therefore, to better understand the issues from learners' perspectives, a study on "**factors affecting Thai students' challenges in learning spoken English**" is essential, particularly at the university level, where English is clearly used as an academic tool. Because university students are responsible for using English for academic conversations, presentations, and accessing scholarly materials, fluency in speaking is becoming increasingly crucial. It is hoped that this research will provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges Thai EFL students face, including interpersonal dynamics, educational experiences, and instructional settings. As previous research indicates, a number of factors, such as language anxiety, a lack of confidence, limited practice opportunities, and teacher-centered instructional approaches, make it difficult for many EFL learners to develop speaking skills (Horwitz et al., 1986; Littlewood, 2007). English instruction in Thai schools has historically placed greater emphasis on exam achievement and grammar than on communicative skills, which may hinder students' ability to communicate effectively in everyday situations (Khamkhien, 2010). Because of this, too many Thai students are hesitant and afraid of making mistakes when speaking English in class.

Though several studies have examined English learning in Thailand, many focus more on teaching strategies or overall language proficiency than on the difficulties of spoken English from the perspective of university students. Therefore, further research is needed to identify the internal and environmental factors that affect Thai students' speaking challenges in EFL settings. Knowing these elements could help teachers and curriculum designers develop more effective teaching methods that boost students' self-confidence and English communication skills.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive methodology, focusing on understanding and interpreting

phenomena through learners' real-life experiences in a natural environment. It emphasizes collecting non-numerical data, such as opinions and personal perspectives, to explore key factors influencing the English-speaking skills of Thai students studying both domestically and internationally. Qualitative research allows researchers to delve deeper into the social context and gain a more thorough understanding of the target group's experiences than general statistical methods. This method is frequently employed in educational research to thoroughly examine participants' viewpoints (Creswell, 2014). To obtain reliable data, a mixed-methods approach was employed. This included semi-structured interviews to elicit in-depth information and detailed accounts from learners, along with a Likert-scale questionnaire to systematically analyze internal and external factors, including attitudes, motivations, concerns, and the learning environment. The integration of interview and questionnaire data enabled researchers to verify the accuracy of their findings and enhance the study's credibility.

1. Participants

The participants in this research were 4 Thai students, specifically selected using purposive sampling based on predefined criteria: having experience learning English in diverse contexts. This was done to gain deeper insight into factors influencing English-speaking ability across various dimensions, including academic context, social environment, and learning styles. The participants were 2 people who studied English in Thailand and 2 who studied English in Indonesia.

The same group of participants received questionnaires from the researchers prior to the interviews to collect preliminary data on their thoughts. The responses to these questionnaires guided the development of additional interview questions, allowing researchers to explore specific issues in greater depth and to clarify participants' responses. This approach ensured that the questions were relevant, focused, and aligned with the research objectives. The participants were between 20 and 30 years old and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The researchers explained the research objectives, data

collection process, and assured the confidentiality of the data in accordance with ethical research principles.

2. Instrument

The instrument used in this research is based on two main theoretical frameworks: **Krashen's second language learning theory (Krashen, 2003)**, which emphasizes the role of emotional factors, particularly anxiety in speaking, according to the emotional filter hypothesis and **Communicative language Teaching (CLT) (Richards, 2006)**, which aims to develop communication skills through the use of language in real-life situations. Both theories help explain internal and external teaching factors that affect Thai students' English-speaking ability.

Table 2.1 presents the indicators used in this study. The indicators were adapted from previous studies and theoretical frameworks related to factors affecting students' English-speaking ability, particularly Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Table 2.1 Questionnaire Indicators

NO	FACTORS	INDICATOR	STATEMENT
1	Internal (Based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis)	Anxiety	I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class.
2			My anxiety makes it difficult for me to speak English fluently.
3			I feel tense when my teacher asks me to speak English without preparation.

4		Fear of making mistakes	I am afraid of making grammatical mistakes when speaking English.	
5			Fear of making mistakes prevents me from participating in speaking activities.	
6			I worry that my classmates will judge me if I speak English incorrectly.	
7			Low Self-confidence	I lack confidence when speaking English in class
8				My low self-confidence affects my English-speaking performance.
9				I feel that my English-speaking ability is lower than my classmates.
10	External (Based on Communicative Language Teaching-	Teaching Method	My teacher's teaching method supports the development of my speaking	

	CLT)		skills.
11			Communication-based activities (role play, discussion, presentation) help improve my speaking ability.
12			I have enough opportunities to practice speaking English in class.
13		Environment	A supportive classroom atmosphere increases my confidence in speaking English.
14			Encouragement from teachers motivates me to speak English more actively.
15			My classmates' attitudes affect my willingness to speak English.
16		Grammar Emphasis	Too much focus on grammar makes me afraid to speak English.
17			I focus more on grammatical

			accuracy than fluency when speaking English.
18			Grammar-oriented teaching reduces my opportunity to practice real communication

Table 2.2: The interview indicators used in this study are shown in Table 2.2. The indicators were modified from earlier research and theoretical frameworks on factors influencing students' proficiency in English.

Table 2.2 Interview Indicators

FACTORS	INDICATOR	NO	QUESTION
Internal (Based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis)	-anxiety	1	(indicator 1: Anxiety) 1.How do you feel when you have to speak English in front of the class? Please describe your feelings. 2.How do anxieties or nervousness affect your ability to speak English? (indicator 2: fear of making
	-fear of making mistakes	2	
		3	
		4	
	-low self-confidence	5	

			<p>mistakes)</p> <p>3.Are you afraid of making mistakes or using incorrect grammar when speaking English? Why or why not?</p> <p>4.How does the fear of making mistakes affect your confidence in speaking English?</p> <p>(indicator 3: Low self-confidence)</p> <p>5.Do you think self-confidence affects your ability to speak English? How?</p>
<p>External (Based on Communicative Language Teaching- CLT)</p>	<p>-teaching method</p> <p>- environment</p> <p>-grammar</p>	<p>6</p> <p>7</p> <p>8</p> <p>9</p> <p>10</p>	<p>(indicator 4: teaching method)</p> <p>6.How do your teachers' teaching methods affect the development of your English-speaking skills?</p>

			<p>7. Do you think communication-focused activities (such as role-playing and discussions) help improve your speaking skills? How?</p> <p>(indicator 5: environment)</p> <p>8. How does the classroom atmosphere affect your confidence in speaking English?</p> <p>9. Do classmates or teacher support affect your confidence in speaking? How?</p> <p>(indicator 6: grammar)</p> <p>10. Does overemphasizing grammar affect your English-speaking fluency? If so,</p>
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			how?
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3. Data collection techniques

In this technique, participant data is gathered using semi-structured interviews and interviews focusing on experiences learning to speak English, the challenges faced, supporting factors, and perceptions of teaching methods.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis uses thematic analysis, which identified key themes arising from the interviews.

This research adhered to ethical research principles, maintaining the confidentiality of participants' personal information and obtaining voluntary informed consent before the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and discussion findings of this research comprise internal and external factors, which are described as follows:

1. Internal Factors

1.1 Anxiety in Speaking English

Based on the interview results, many students experience anxiety or nervousness while speaking in English, particularly when speaking in front of the class or interacting with others in the language. Sometimes, this worry causes students to pause when speaking or forget words. This is in line with interviews with S1, who stated, *“When excited, I overthink and worry, affecting my fluency and causing me to stutter”* (S1), while S2 similarly noted, *“When I’m too excited... I tend to forget what I’m going to say”* (S2). This indicates that anxiety negatively affects students’ speaking performance.

The finding is in line with Stephen Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. According to Krashen, emotional variables like anxiety might function as a filter that restricts language use and prevents language input. Anxiety raises a student's affective filter, which can hinder their ability to speak English fluently.

1.2 Fear of Making Mistakes

The interviews also showed a fear of making mistakes as an internal factor. Several pupils expressed concern about utilizing improper pronunciation or grammar. Some kids would rather remain silent than use English due to this concern. This is consistent with S1's interview, in which S1 reported, *"I was quite scared even using incorrect grammar could change the meaning"* (S1). Similarly, S2 stated that in the past, *"I was afraid of making mistakes. It undermined my confidence"* (S2). This indicates that the fear of making mistakes reduces students' confidence in speaking English.

Stephen Krashen's (1982) idea that fear and negative emotions can raise the affective filter is also supported by this outcome. Students may avoid speaking exercises if they are afraid of making mistakes, which reduces their chances to practice and improve their language skills.

1.3 Self-confidence

Another significant factor influencing pupils' speaking abilities was self-confidence. More self-assured students typically participate more actively in speaking exercises and freely express their opinions. Conversely, students who lack confidence frequently hesitate to use English. This aligns with what S3 stated, *"If we are confident in ourselves, we will dare to speak and not be afraid of being judged"* (S3). Similarly, S4 indicated that *"self-confidence has a significant impact on speaking English, we can speak confidently"* (S4). This demonstrates that self-confidence plays a crucial role in speaking ability.

Self-confidence is crucial for language learning, according to Stephen Krashen (1982). Confident learners have a reduced affective filter, making it easier for them to take in and use language input.

2. External Factors

2.1 Teaching Methods

The interviews also showed how instructional strategies affect students' growth as English speakers. Students

stated that more regular English practice is made possible by interactive teaching techniques, including speaking exercises and conversations. This finding aligns with interviews with S2, who stated that *“teachers who encourage conversation and speaking practice help students speak the language more fluently and feel more comfortable”* (S2). Meanwhile, S3 *“observed that some teachers focus too much on grammar and too little on speaking practice”* (S3). This suggests that teaching methods influence students' speaking development.

It aligns with Jack C. Richards's (2006) view on the significance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). According to Richards, learning a language should prioritize communication over mere memorization of grammar rules.

2.2 Communicative Learning Activities

Students reported that more opportunities to practice speaking English are provided through activities such as role-plays, group discussions, and English chats. These exercises enhance students' confidence and fluency. This is consistent with S1 and S3, with S1 stating, *“It helps because I get to practice the language”* (S1). Similarly, S3 explained that the role-playing activity *“helped me express what was on my mind and become more fluent”* (S3), demonstrating that communicative activities help develop speaking skills.

According to Jack C. Richards (2006), communicative activities are essential in language courses because they allow students to use the language in pertinent situations and develop communicative competence.

2.3 Classroom Environment

The classroom setting was another external factor revealed by the interviews. When professors promote involvement and the classroom environment is friendly, students feel more at ease speaking English. This interview result is consistent with S1, S2, and S3, with S3 stating, *“Support from teachers and friends makes me more confident in speaking up.”* And S2 said, *“Friends cheering me on makes me more confident.”* While S1 stated, *“It has an effect because of the supportive atmosphere and social environment.”*

It suggests that the classroom setting influences students' willingness to speak English. Students feel more at ease sharing

their thoughts and taking part in speaking exercises when the classroom environment is encouraging. Stephen Krashen (1982) asserts that emotional factors such as anxiety and self-assurance are critical to language acquisition. Students' anxiety and emotional filtering can be reduced in a supportive classroom setting, which aids language learning. Furthermore, because it motivates students to engage actively with language, Jack C. Richards (2006) highlights the significance of an engaging and encouraging classroom environment in communicative language instruction.

Overall, the results indicate that both internal and external factors shape students' English-speaking. On the internal side, factors such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence discourage students from participating in spoken communication. These emotional challenges often lead to hesitation, excessive self-monitoring, and avoidance of speaking tasks, which is consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. On the external side, elements including teaching approaches, communicative classroom activities, and the overall learning environment significantly contribute to students' speaking development. Instructional methods that emphasize interaction and real-life communication, such as discussions and role-play, create more opportunities for language use and help improve both confidence and fluency. In addition, a supportive classroom atmosphere encourages students to engage more actively and reduces their fear of speaking.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of addressing both psychological and pedagogical factors to improve students' English-speaking skills. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic knowledge, educators should consider students' emotional readiness and create learning conditions that encourage risk-taking and active participation. Implementing communicative teaching strategies and fostering a positive, supportive classroom environment can help reduce students' affective barriers and promote more effective language use. These findings have practical implications for teachers in

designing more engaging, student-centered learning experiences that enhance speaking proficiency among Thai EFL learners. As a result, communicative teaching strategies, opportunities for practical language practice, and the development of a positive learning environment should be given top priority to help Thai students improve their English-speaking abilities. This study advances knowledge of the difficulties English language learners encounter when learning English as a second language. It offers instructors useful advice on creating lessons that help students speak the language more fluently.

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