Design of an English Speaking Skills Development Course for Second Language Learners.

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Abstract: *This was a research and development(R&D) study that set out to identify a way to help develop English speaking skills of second language learners in a second language learning context. This study analyzed and defined speaking in a way which differentiates it from other language skills and areas, so that it can be effectively developed. The researcher concluded that the most appropriate fluency development tasks of a speaking skills course needed for a second language learning context are drama, role plays, simulation and improvisation under the general term of 'Drama', where the speaking tasks are varied a lot and are ideal for classes or groups of learners of mixed levels. The researcher also concluded that an English speaking skills development course in a second language learning context using fluency development tasks under the term 'Drama' comprises a range of activities, where the teacher has many opportunities to 'fine tune' the activities to the learners' levels, and the speaking activities are themselves task-based, preparing second language learners for real life situations, focusing on meanings first. These are relevant to the learners using authentic English, as social interaction is highly effective in developing speaking skills geared towards fluency for second language learners. This article also outlines a task-based activity drama program with example course schedules, objectives and activities for a second language learning context for the development of second language learner speaking skills geared towards fluency.*

Keywords: Attitudes, Communication Strategies, Drama, Effective, Efficient, Fluency.

Introduction

In Thailand there is a wide range of educational institutions available to the public, such as government schools which include Wat (i.e., temple) schools, and private Thai schools teaching through the Thai medium, bilingual schools basically teaching through 50/50 English and Thai, English program schools (EP) teaching mainly through the English medium with approximately an 80% / 20% English / Thai division, and international schools which teach using the English medium. There are other schools in the minority, such as Muslim schools and Chinese schools.

There have been problems dealing with education in the past and also today. According to a personal communication (2011), problems range from a lack of fully operational secondary schools as bilingual schools in instances where the educational aims and contents of the courses of the schools differ from one to another with different systems, many schools functioning in their own way, but this also occurs with Thai language schools, as well as can be seen from the Learning Participants Environment data.

On the other hand, the Thai Ministry of Education did take some steps to curtail unqualified foreign teachers teaching in schools. Language centres can be seen to offer courses in 'Training to Teach', where these centers are licensed to train people, with or without a Bachelor's degree, for TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) and getting a TEFL certification which also includes a Thai language and culture course offered by PLC (2012). The Thai language and culture course is a required course by the Ministry of Education. Thus, it is possible for a 'garage repair man' with a degree in 'Panel Beating' to become an English teacher in a school. Apparently, having done such a 'course' in a language centre these foreign teachers can teach temporarily for one year, but in order

to get a teacher's license a special course must be done by the Teacher's Council and then be able to apply for a teacher's license in Thailand. The internet also provides some interesting reading on this topic.

Even though there are many problems in schools, including the English Program, ranging from the Ministry of Education for school owners, management, teachers, pupils, to the parents, this study focused on only one problem area--the speaking ability of the students.

Statement of the Problem

As English has become seen as crucial for Thailand's economic development, for professional use and obtaining better jobs for middle class Thais, the English Program (EP) schools were born. According to personal communications (2011) and Holmes,Tangtontavy, Tomizawa (1995), while the teaching of vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing is deemed good enough by most Thais and the educational establishment in general, oral/aural skills, especially speaking skills are considered a weak area in both traditional and EP programs.

According to Holmes, Tangtontavy, Tomizawa (1995), and personal communications (2011), this weakness seems to emanate from a number of possible sources, such as an inability by the Thai teachers to speak English properly, shyness on the part of the Thai teachers and not wanting to lose face, no emphasis being put on the speaking ability in the examination process, reluctance on the part of teachers to speak English in any way, because they do not think it is important enough in the learning process. Furthermore, Thai students, like their teachers, do not want to make mistakes in class, so that they are reluctant to apply themselves to learn to speak, thus making their teachers' job seemingly impossible.

A personal communication (2011) regarding the context of schools also stated that native-speaking teachers and foreign-made course books have been and are used to help Thai children improve their speaking. But the results have fallen short of most expectations and it was also stated that there were many reasonable ideas as to why the children's English speaking has not improved. Unfortunately, Thai teachers and administrators are quick to find fault with the foreign teachers' teaching ability, and native-speaking teachers are just as quick to assign blame on the students, the administration, and the educational practices. But Thai teachers, administrators and native-English speaking teachers have not looked into what research has shown to be essential for teenagers in an EFL context to develop their speaking skills.

With the increase in numbers of English Program schools and the increase of English speaking degree courses being offered by the universities of Thailand, students are now able to avail themselves of English speaking degree courses in many more fields than ever before. (Note: Secondary 6 / Matayom 6 students in Thailand are usually seventeen years of age). But there is an inherent problem facing EP students and teachers alike in that there is no real focus in Thai schools for the development of the speaking ability of the students in English as second language.

The aim of an English Program (EP) in schools, for example, is to educate students to become proficient in the English language. That means they must also become proficient in their speaking, especially to be able to do an English speaking degree course, for example. But the question which must be asked is, 'Surely the function of any English language course in any school teaching English as a second language is to get the students to become as proficient as possible in the English language, so that the students can realistically be prepared to use the English language in the real world at some point in their lives?'

This study aimed to alleviate the situation by providing a means in the form of a speaking skills development course to develop the speaking ability of learners of English as a second language, which is geared towards fluency and which can be used by teachers to provide this focus in schools for the students. It can also educationally help and support the teachers in the implementation of the course, with a specific focal point in mind concerning the development of the speaking skills for the benefit of the students. This would, in turn, benefit the parents/the school/workforce and ultimately Thailand. This research, in the form of an R&D project, looked at a particular solution which could result in

making more effective teaching of speaking skills possible. This research study was more concerned with the 'lack of ability of the students to speak English and what can be done to resolve the problem', both from the students' and the teachers' perspectives, rather than attaching blame to any party for lack of improvement in this area up to now. This study involved the design of an English speaking skills development course geared towards fluency for a second language learning context which can be fine-tuned to suit second language learners' levels of speaking ability.

Objective of the Study

This study set out to develop an approach of teaching for the development of speaking skills geared towards speaking fluency in a classroom in the context of second language learners.

Research Questions

The two research questions were:
    1. What are the appropriate fluency development tasks of a speaking skills course needed for a second language (L2) learning context?
    2. How effective could an English speaking skills development course be in a second language (L2) learning context?

Significance of the Study

Second language learners learning English using only reading and writing skills for the English language, with no focus on listening and speaking skills, are handicapped with the English language. They would realistically be unable to fully use English as a second language in real life. They would probably be deterred from attending university courses taught through the English medium. Also, they would probably not be able to apply for work in industry, where the English language would need to be used on a daily basis.

    The use of an English speaking skills development course for a second language learning context geared towards fluency would not only go a long way in preparing second language learners using task-based activities to be prepared for real-life experiences using authentic English. But, also it would promote the idea that second language learners need not be deterred from attending university courses taught through the English medium. The study's aim is that future workers for industry, as well as present day workers, could be better prepared employees, being able to use the English language in the workplace without feelings of being handicapped with regard to English language use.

Scope of the Study

This study only pertained to the development of speaking skills of second language learners geared towards fluency. The participants of the research study were limited to undergraduate students of Burapha University who had at least a basic command of English speaking skills. The study focused on activities for speaking skill development geared towards fluency for second language learners of English.

    (Note: Secondary 6 / Matayom 6 students in Thailand are usually seventeen years of age. Thus, students in their first year of University are usually eighteen years of age and, as undergraduates, are still in their teenage years. The university undergraduate research participants were actually secondary school students three months previously. The research participants were the closest group to school students which could be ethically involved in research for a number of reasons and were also chosen because of their age, level of maturity, level of experience, level of knowledge, memory of school, and still being young Thai students.)

Limitations of the Study

A research study was carried out using volunteer undergraduate students of Burapha University as participants who had just completed their education in Thai schools through the Thai medium and were not immersed yet into their English language degree programs. This research study was carried out to demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiency of the developmental speaking skills course in developing speaking skills which were geared towards fluency for second language learners of English.

Research Design

This was an R&D study carried out on participants who were undergraduate students attending Burapha University. The aim was to show the effectiveness and efficiency of the developmental speaking skills course through drama combined with interview data, using open-ended questions, researcher observation data and audio-visual data both of the interviews and the course of activities.

In this situation, the design of an English speaking skills development course for an L2 learning context geared towards fluency could be described as a program or a process geared towards fluency.

Research Strategy

In this R&D study, the data were collected in different ways by using semi-structured interview data and a questionnaire based on the attitudes of the research participants. There was also researcher observation information and the pre- and post-activities of the practical study were videotaped for fluency observation and also showing the practicality of the design of the speaking skills course with second language learners. The interviews were also videotaped.

'Attitudes' by definition pertain to the opinions, beliefs, even the feelings of the participants regarding the idea of the activities, doing the activities and how the activities work for the individual participants.

This strategy here involved the gathering of data using qualitative methods, analyses of the data, evaluation of the data and how this information could be used for further development of the design of the speaking skills development course, then offering the course to be used by second language learners.

Research Method

There were five basic R&D steps to be followed. Swanson and Holton (2001) stated that personnel training and development (T&D) is a component of Human Resource Development (HRD). There are five standard practices: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation stages, known as the ADDIE process. The data collection and analysis was done throughout the five stages of the study with regard to Problem Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation of the ADDIE process. For the R&D study this ADDIE process was utilized for achieving its purposes.

Upon the observation of a problem, namely the lack of English speaking skills, in Thai schools, it was decided to read the curriculum for Thai schools, conduct interviews with school officials as personal communications, as well as holding a Discussion Forum on Education with Thai university students to confirm the existence of the problem from the students' perspective.

Methodology

The following is the layout of the ADDIE model used for this Research and Development study.

A – Analysis stage

Problem Analysis: Analyze the English speaking problem of second language learners in so far as to:

1) Point out the causes of the problem. The reasons may include motivation, culture, second language learning environment size, second language learning environment layout, resources,

language skills of teachers, teaching techniques of teachers, and second language learning environment management skills. Thornbury (2005), Wessels (1987), and Bygate (1987), for example, pointed to situations preventing speaking skill development and factors which contributed to the successful teaching of speaking skills. The personal communications outlined the problems in schools and a Forum on Education conducted by the researcher confirmed the problems, as outlined by the literature research. The curriculum for Thai schools was also examined, only to find that there was no real focus or emphasis on the development of speaking skills for the students.

2) How to solve the problem. According to Thornbury (2005), there are types of speaking activities which develop fluency such as: i) drama, role-play, simulation, and improvisation; ii) conversation and chat; iii) presentations and talks; iv) stories, jokes, and anecdotes; v) discussions and debates; and vi) outside-class speaking, which needed to be compared and contrasted to choose the most appropriate activities for the English speaking skills development course which is geared towards fluency. According to Thornbury (2005), 'Drama' is a more general term which encompasses role play and simulation and other types of activities, as well such as recitation, play-reading and improvisation.

Rivers and Temperley (1978) made the point that there was a gap between skill getting and skill learning and that psuedo-communication activities would be ideal in bridging the gap. Bygate (1987) commented on three kinds of activities, such as oral practice for grammar learning, structured interaction and autonomous interaction, so that a student can progress from knowledge of rules to communication in the form of pseudo-communication. Bygate (1987) noted that language exists for various purposes and that students needed to know how to use language for different purposes. Rivers and Temperley (1978) commented that students needed opportunities to develop a second language for interaction and communication, where motivation needed to be aroused with activities and could range in natural interactional contexts from establishing and maintaining social relations, to talking on the phone, to acting out social roles, and that when the activity became autonomous then the student would draw on elements from other activities in other categories of interaction. But Rivers and Temperley (1978) did state that bridging the gap between skill-getting and skill-learning is not automatic and that activities had to be designed to be pseudo-communication to lead naturally to spontaneous communication which, of course, meant that activities had to be taught, learnt, practiced, and rehearsed for the learners to be able to deal with real life situations and where relevance for the learners would support the motivational aspects as well.

Task-based learning has been advocated by Luchini (2004) and Nunan (2005) as playing a crucial role in language development and can be used for meeting specific needs. On the other hand, task-based teaching was recommended by Raof & Yusof (2006), Nunn (2006) and Lingley (2006) for focusing on meaning, providing interaction, developing speaking skills, and providing for pragmatic and linguistic competence with preparation for real world tasks.

Thus, the Rivers and Temperley (1978) framework showed how the task-based activities in a course framework using 'Drama' could be used to bridge the gap between skill getting and skill using. As well, cognitive psychology, according to Goldstein (2005, 2011) conceptualizes learning with the different memories and the way they interact, along with how information processing works along with production of sounds and choice of words. It appears that a combination of task-based teaching with task-based learning by students of activities mirroring real life situations focusing on speaking skill development using the most appropriate type of speaking activity develops fluency using authentic materials within the most appropriate learning environment. This would result in a solution for the development of speaking skills geared towards fluency for second language learners in a course format.

Therefore, the expectancy of a course designed for the development of speaking skills using task-based activities mirroring real life events using authentic English geared towards fluency preparing learners for real life English language use is high. Essentially, it addresses the problem areas which inhibit the development of speaking skills, such as motivation, culture, teacher language skills, teacher teaching techniques, resources, class size, class layout, and classroom management.

D – Design stage

The framework of the speaking skills development course: To design a speaking skills development course and the type of speaking activities to be used was chosen through comparing and contrasting different types of speaking activities.

Drama, role-play, simulation, and improvisation were found through a compare and contrast process to be the most appropriate type of speaking activities. The definition as such is that they are speaking activities of a wide range that to a degree involve acting out a story, within a given role often, but with various degrees of spontaneity. They are tremendously varied and so for mixed level classes are ideal where many opportunities are provided for the teacher to 'fine-tune' activities to the level of the students. Thus, for the purposes of this research study, 'Drama' is the most appropriate type of speaking tasks for the speaking skills development course and is the solution of the problem of a lack of speaking skill of second language learners and an alternative learning environment is more acceptable to second language learners.

Design deals with designing the developmental English speaking skills course using 'drama' activities for 'Communicative skill production' and 'Communicative skill development'. At the same time, there is consideration for cognitive psychology dealing with information processing and the psychology behind exposure, communication and preparation for drama. Also the Rivers and Temperley (1978) framework is acknowledged with regards to cognition, production and interaction with a focus on skill-getting and skill-using, but concentrating on the idea of pseudo-communication to bridge the gap between skill-getting and skill-using which is where the course for the development of speaking skills geared towards fluency is concentrated. Having chosen 'Drama' to be the most appropriate speaking tasks type needed for the speaking skill development course, then activities had to be chosen. In this stage the activities were also chosen from different sources for the course which were scoped and sequenced as well as lesson plans for the activities being drawn up for the speaking skills development course for real life preparation.

The 'Learning Environment': A group of 'learning environment participants' discussed the learning environment in Thai schools with a Thai English teacher which is teacher centered (Traditional Environment) and the learning situation in Thai schools with a foreign English language teacher which is learner centered (Alternative environment). The topics discussed were motivation, culture, second language learning environment size, second language learning environment layout, resources, language skills of teachers, teaching techniques of teachers, and second language learning environment management skills. The participants had a preference based on their attitudes for the Alternative Environment which was used as a template in the design of the course to develop English speaking skills geared towards fluency for second language learners.

A professional ELT consultant and a student highly proficient in English were consulted regarding the scoping and sequencing of the activities and the activity lesson plans and any suggestions made would be considered in the development phase, but no suggestions were made at this stage.

D – Development stage

Development: Development relates to the make-up of the course regarding the details of the activities in the form of scope and sequencing which pertains to scoping the activities and the sequencing of the activities for the development of the speaking skills, including use of activity worksheets and materials needed, if any.

1. The aim of this designed course of activities was to develop speaking skills and doing an analysis of the fluency levels of the research participants, only pertaining to the activities themselves and not to a generalized fluency level in the English language for speaking skills for use in the real world for real life situations.

2. The idea of having a course of activities for developing skills in a real world scenario involved the following: exposure to the English language, use of speech, practice of speech and activities, scripting, dramatizing the activities, interaction with others on a daily basis, thus doing a course of the activities relevant to learners to prepare the learners for real life situations using authentic English.

3. The course of activities could be used in a support role to a school curriculum, especially if the English language is taught on a daily basis.

4. The course of activities could also be used in a corporate setting, focusing on speaking skills to supplement the employees' training in other areas of the English language with a possible combination of other skills to be learnt.

5. The course of activities was also flexible in that it could be used to meet the needs of the learners and the teacher, such as for different class levels in school and young or old learners of a second language.

Further consultations with a professional Developmental Editor who is also an ELT publisher and a Thai university lecturer also took place regarding the scoping and sequencing of the activities and activity lesson plans. Suggestions were made by the ELT publisher and were agreed to by the other consultant, resulting in revisions being made to the scope and sequencing of the activities and the activity lesson plans were also revised. As a result the revised scope and sequencing of activities, as well as revised lesson plans for the activities, were used in the implementation stage.

I - Implementation stage

Implementation: This step involved the implementation of the activities using the most appropriate learning/teaching environment template and collecting data during the implementation. This involved using a group of thirty undergraduates as research participants. The participants were non-native English language speakers (NNELS), such as Thai students with a basic command of speaking skills in the English language. The activities were presented to the research participants as follows: a pre-activity phase to ensure the participants had no prior knowledge of the activities, thus ensuring that their basic fluency levels for the activities were zero as such for the purpose of this study, a practice phase where the participants were introduced to the activities and could practice them in groups, and a post-activity phase where the participants carried out the activities themselves.

If the research participants had not conducted the activity properly, nor achieved the desired result, then the researcher would inform the research participants what was needed to be done and then oversaw the research participants achieve the desired result, thus making sure the research participants benefitted themselves by doing the activities. All three phases were timed for efficiency evaluation later and video-taped for observation of details and fluency evaluation later.

Participants and sampling strategy: The type of sampling was purposive sampling of thirty participants who were undergraduate students attending Burapha University and having a basic speaking command of the English language. Research Instruments: Revised 'scope and sequencing' and activity lesson plans.

E – Evaluation stage

Evaluation of the implementation of the course of activities. The following were evaluated: the fluency levels of the research participants and the attitudes of the research participants to the course of activities. The following were also evaluated: research participant favorability to the course of activities for developing speaking skills, research participants' percentage favorability of activity course in relation to levels of fluency with activities done, the relationship of research participant percentage favorability with fluency levels for number of activities, and the course activity time length for research participants to ultimately show the effectiveness and efficiency of the design of an English speaking skills development course for second language learners.

There was an evaluation of the participants' attitudes toward the course, including the activities using interviews and questionnaires. This was a study of activity implementation by setting up a second language learning environment for the participants, so as to implement the activity tasks in a second language learning situation which would be used for the developmental speaking skills course geared towards fluency using task-based activities to prepare second language learners for real-life situations using authentic English.

There was also an evaluation of the efficiency of the course of activities by focusing on the time length to complete the activities by the research participants to show the efficiency of the course of activities by using the video-tapes of the pre- and post-activity recordings.

This was a study carried out with Burapha University undergraduate students as participants to show the effectiveness and efficiency of the developmental speaking skills course geared towards fluency through drama.

Collection of Data

The results of the development of the speaking skills were seen, observed and monitored as follows: pre- and post-activity videotaping for study activities also used for fluency measurement, researcher journal kept, observation field notes were gathered, questionnaire and semi-structured interviews (taped and transcribed) for the research participants based on attitudes. The results were then evaluated with regards to the effectiveness and efficiency of the design of the English speaking skills development course for second language learners as well as the fluency levels of the research participants.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis of video-taped material for participant fluency pertaining to effectiveness of the course of activities was done. Interviews and questionnaires were also analyzed. There was also an analysis of time for activities pertaining to efficiency of the course of activities. The relationships of research participants' percentage favorability to levels of fluency for the activities done and number of activities were also analyzed.

Discussion of Findings

Research question 1 can be answered in that 'Drama' in the form of role play, simulation and improvisation are the appropriate fluency development tasks.

Research question 2 was answered by the research study on the course of activities that the activities themselves and the course of activities were effective in developing speaking skills geared towards fluency, in that 93% of participants achieved a high fluency level and 7% of the participants achieved a medium fluency level for the course of activities.

The response favorability of the participants indicated very highly that the participants liked the activities very much, thought that the activities were very effective, developed speaking skills very well and could help second language learners very much.

Regarding the questionnaire, the attitudes of the research participants indicated that they liked the activities very much for developing speaking skills and that the activities were highly effective in developing speaking skills very well.

Regarding the research participant interviews, the participants liked the activities for developing speaking skills for many reasons, such as that they were fun or interesting, to speak English, to help with or learn a lot of English and thought the activities were effective in helping them to speak English better and be used in real life.

Efficiency: Efficiency of the developmental speaking skills course depended on the fluency levels achieved for the time spent on the activities by the research participants and it was shown that the course was highly efficient for the production of fluency levels achieved with exposure to the course for a limited period.

Conclusion

1. It can be concluded that the most appropriate type of speaking tasks to develop fluency is drama, role play, simulation and improvisation using the general term 'Drama' and are suited to different students' levels, where the activities which are accommodated are more open ended and so better able to promote fluency development by enabling fluency practice and the teacher has a lot of control in developing fluency, where learning motivation is provided, authentic English used, the focus is on meaning first and interaction is enabled.

2. The speaking skills development course has been shown to be highly effective. The research participant attitude questionnaire elicited overall a highly positive response from the research participants of 81.9%, plus a positive response of 17.7%, with no negative responses.

3. The response favorability of the research participants showed they liked the activities very

much, thought the activities were very effective, developed speaking skills very well and could help second language learners very much.

4. The questionnaire showed that the attitudes of the research participants were that they liked the activities for developing speaking skills very much and that the activities were highly effective in developing speaking skills.

5. The research participant interviews showed that the research participants liked the activities for developing speaking skills, as they were fun, interesting, helped with or learn English a lot, as well as thinking the activities were effective in helping to speak English better and could be used in real life.

6. The speaking skills development course was also shown to be effective from the point of view of efficiency, as it was shown that the course of activities was highly efficient, in that high course levels of fluency were achieved by 93% of the research participants when the research participants were exposed to the course of activities for a limited period of time.

Implications

The most appropriate type of speaking task is 'Drama', incorporating drama, role play, simulation and improvisation. The course of activities was highly effective in developing speaking skills geared towards fluency. The research participants themselves liked the activities very much, thought the activities were highly effective and developed speaking skills very well and could help second language learners very much. The course of activities was highly efficient for the production of fluency levels.

Thus the course of activities for developing speaking skills geared towards fluency was highly effective and efficient, as well as being highly liked to help speak English better and be used in real life for second language learners.

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