

# Chapter 7

## How to improve students' speaking skills?

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**Teaching experience**

29 Years

**Area of interest in teaching**

Comprehensive reading, vocabulary meaning in context analysis, grammar and language structure analysis, paragraph writing development and speaking English in specific contexts.

## Introduction

A great number of studies (McKay, 2004; Srisang, 2014; Wanich, 2014) argue that English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2000) is on the rise. Darasawang (2007) asserts that the main purpose of learning English is how to use it in staged-goal-oriented situations (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Mingsakoon & Srinon, 2019) including communication, education, business, and tourism.

Regarding the use of English in Thailand, Srisang (2014) highlights that membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is an increasingly important factor. It is now a prerequisite that Thai people should be able to use English for communication. For this reason, since 2002 the Ministry of Education has prioritised English language teaching and learning in schools, focusing on communicative medium skills with an emphasis on accuracy and fluency.

Speaking is arguably the most important productive language skill in English. It is taught at schools to empower Thai people's employability, including opportunities to secure good jobs and business negotiations on the international stage (Ur, 1996; Wanich, 2014). Nevertheless, Thai people struggle with speaking English because they rarely use the language day-to-day, and there is interference from Thai as their mother tongue. This largely explains Thai people's lack of self-confidence and shyness when using English for communication.

As such, the purpose of my research was to use Exploratory Action Research (Creswell, 2008) to improve students' speaking skills in the context of ELF at a Thai upper secondary school. English teachers in Thailand are increasingly under pressure to improve their students' speaking competence in order to meet society's purposes and expectations (Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). This report aims to explain how ELF Thai upper secondary school students were encouraged to begin to speak English, described in the classroom activities provided in the curriculum and teacher's lesson plan.

## Method

The participants of this study were selected from 267 students in seven classes of Mattayom Suksa 6 (Upper Secondary School-Grade 12) at Hunkhapittayakom Secondary School, Chainat Province, in northern central Thailand. These students were enrolled in the Fundamental English 6 course, in the second semester of academic year 2022. At this point they had been learning English at school for at least 10 years.

There were 25 students in Mattayom Suksa 6 (Grade 12) special class (10 boys and 15 girls, age 17–18) in the programme of Science and Technology. These students devoted two hours per week to this special programme. However, when observing these students' learning behaviours, I deemed that they were very shy and lacked the confidence to speak English, or even to cooperate with the speaking activities the teacher provided to challenge their speaking performance. Therefore, despite a long period of learning English at school, such students were not viewed as being able to use English for communication.

As mentioned above, this study is aimed at investigating teaching strategies that can improve students' speaking skills and help them cope with shyness and lack of confidence in interactions and information exchanges. Thus, my research questions are presented as follows:

- What did students practise before doing the speaking activities?
- How did the students feel when they practised speaking English before doing the speaking tasks?
- What prevented the students from giving their ideas in the discussion task?

The research instruments I used — mainly described in the stages of Exploratory Data Collection and Expanded Action Plan in Action Research (Rebolledo & Bullock, 2020) — consisted of:

#### A. Exploratory Data Collection Stage (EDCS)

- Open-ended questions from a survey to collect students' ideas, feelings, and attitudes towards the first teaching speaking activities organised in the class
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to get the students' opinions about my teaching strategies
- Reflective Writing Journal written by me as the teacher researcher to discover what happened in the classroom in which the students were taught English speaking skills

#### B. Expanded Action Plan Stage (EAPS)

- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to recheck the students' opinions about my teaching strategies and activities organised for speaking practice and performance
- Peer Observation to reflect what the teacher researcher's peer noticed and what he/she thought about the teaching speaking activities organised in the classroom
- Lesson Plan, with pre-while-post teaching English speaking engagement, to recheck which teaching activities or strategies in the action lesson plan encouraged the students to be more confident speaking English



The teaching/learning strategies and main activities relate to pre-while-post teaching speaking activities. Before starting to speak, the students were engaged with both the meaning of the keywords and the structures of modelling sentences. They then performed pronunciation, intonation, and stress practices by listening to the teacher and watching clips from YouTube and shadowing (repeating the content heard). Finally, during the post-speaking activities, the students expressed their ideas through speaking tasks in both pair work and group work. Regarding the teaching/learning strategies, the details of the pre-while-post teaching speaking are described as follows:

- A. Multi-Media Use was implemented when the students were asked to imitate the pronunciation and stress of the keywords and the intonation of sentences when watching internet clips on YouTube or TikTok, and using smart phones with an online dictionary.

- B. Concept-Checking Questions (CCQ) were used in the form of Yes-No questions to check whether the students understood the task clearly.
- C. Word Meaning and Structure Substitution Drills were deployed when the students practised saying the keywords and sentences in context.
- D. Pronunciation Practice of Intonation and Drills was engaged when the students listened to the teacher, repeated after him, and said the missing parts in front of the whole class.
- E. Pair Work and Group Work were organised, in which the students practised saying things related to the tasks and expressed speaking performance in the target task.

Activity Name/Title	Pre-teaching speaking English	While-teaching speaking English	Post-teaching speaking English
Using Social Media	Yes	Yes	No
Concept-Checking Questions	No	Yes	Yes
Word Meaning and Structure	Yes	Yes	No
Pronunciation, Intonation, and Drilling Work with teacher	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pair Work and Group Work	No	Yes	Yes

Table 7.1. List of activities used in teaching speaking English

I collected the data with respect to the two main stages of the research design and tools. To begin with, at the Exploratory Data Collection Stage (EDCS), I analysed the data from both students' and my ideas, feelings, and attitudes towards teaching speaking activities to fundamentally investigate what the authentic problem was when students learned and performed speaking. Additionally, at the Expanded Action Plan Stage (EAPS), I used the information derived from the EDCS to create background problems used when designing teaching speaking lesson plans. After these plans were implemented in the class, I collected and analysed both students' and my peer's opinions about the teaching activities to expound which speaking skills of my students had improved and how.



## Findings

Organising the class with the pre-while-post teaching speaking lesson plan revealed that implementing multimedia, concept-checking questions, demonstration and pronunciation, and intonation practices was beneficial in enhancing the students' speaking abilities at the end of the class. Nevertheless, designing speaking models (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Mingsakoon & Srinon, 2019) for certain speaking situations and applying them with substitution drills and group work organisation would probably encourage students to speak English better in real-life interactions. For this reason, the findings about students' strategies and the teacher's teaching techniques are discussed threefold, as follows.

First, for the vast majority of the participants, employing social media (specifically internet clips on YouTube and TikTok) contributed to their speaking abilities. The students used these media (in conjunction with smart phones with online dictionaries) to study the meaning of words and sentences and to imitate how to pronounce words and phrases. Second, most students agreed that pronunciation, intonation, and accent practice

with repetition after the teacher; and concept-checking questions and substitution drills on sentence structures encouraged them to be more confident to participate in speaking tasks. Lastly, participants also reported that pair work and group work were effective dynamics in teaching speaking activities. Most participants said that word meaning investigation and sentence structure understanding made them more confident before doing the speaking tasks. Substitution drills on sentence structures encouraged them to be more confident before doing the speaking tasks. After employing the action lesson plan, the participants maintained that using several kinds of multimedia enabled them to speak better because they had pre-encountered word meanings and sentence structures. The bar graphs below show the numbers of students for each learning strategy/teaching technique, separated into Focus Group and Peer Observing data.



No. of students

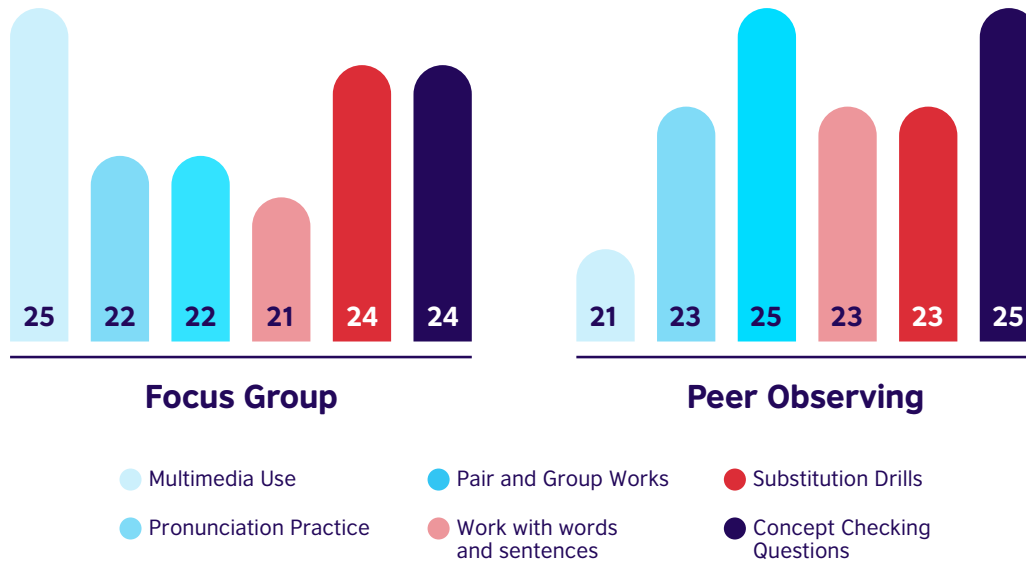


Figure 7.1. Students' Learning Strategies and Teacher's Teaching Techniques

Most of the students reflected that the teacher's use of concept-checking questions helped them to

overcome shyness and become more confident to perform the speaking task.

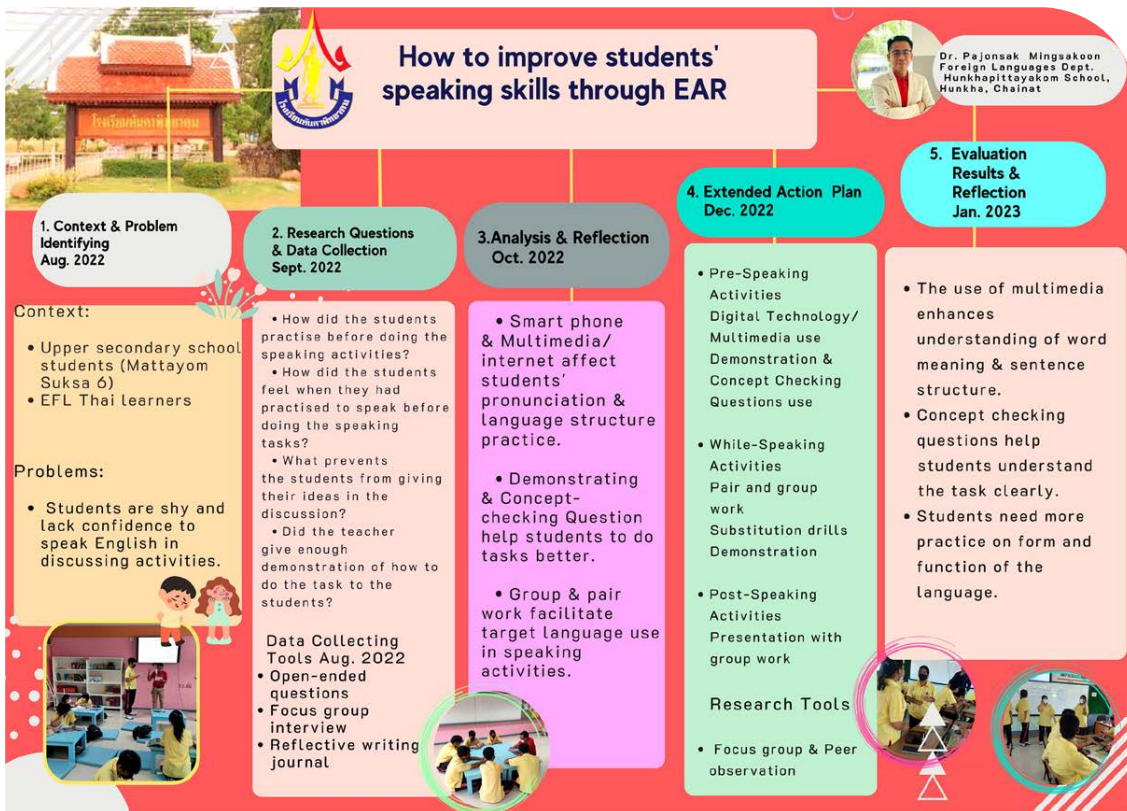


Figure 7.2. Poster Presentation

## Discussion

The pre-while-post teaching speaking activities were applied using a communicative teaching approach because the information exchange and interaction among the participants was promoted while doing the activities provided. Before starting to speak, the students were engaged with both the meaning of the keywords and the structures of the modelling sentences themselves, as well as pronunciation, intonation, and stress practice. At the post-speaking activities stage, the students expressed their ideas through the speaking tasks in both pair work and group work. This implies that the use of multimedia before speaking activities helped the students gain a better understanding of word meaning and sentence structure. Likewise, they needed more practice so that they could use those words and sentence structures in different circumstances. Nevertheless, the students still struggled to use the target language in some activities.

To sum up, the class with social media use for background practising of vocabulary, sentence structure, and language functions was very useful because it enabled the students to gain a better understanding of word meaning and sentence structure. Substitution drills together with pair and group work seemed essential to students' willingness before starting to say things in English. To extend the research, a possible idea is to allow students to work in their own groups independently by observing them from a distance and assisting them only when they encounter problems. Doing so might encourage them to perform more speaking in the target task. Designing speaking models (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Mingsakoon & Srinon, 2019) in some speaking situations and then applying them with substitution drills and group work organisation would probably lead students to be more confident when exposed to speaking interactions in their daily life in the future.

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