



Factors Affecting English Speaking Skills and Attitudes of Students Majoring in Teaching English at the Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University

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Abstract

The four basic skills of learning a language (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are essential in real-life communication; however, speaking has been a challenge to numerous EFL learners in non-native speaking nations, such as Thailand, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. The present study aims at investigating the factors affecting English speaking skills and attitudes for students majoring in teaching English at the Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University, Lao PDR. It looks at the factors that affect students' English-speaking skills and attitudes, and discusses some possible strategies that might help to improve students' speaking skills. The instrument was a questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale, which covered student, teacher, curriculum, school environment and social factors. It was distributed to 53 students of English in years 2, 3 and 4, who were selected as the population sample. There were 24 male and 29 female participants. SPSS was employed to analyze the data and indicate the results in descriptive tables. The results revealed that the key factors that affected the students' speaking skills were classroom temperature and noise, with means of 3.96 and 3.78, respectively. Other factors among the 10 top-ranked included the student factors of not knowing the right vocabulary words (mean of 3.69), not knowing what to say (3.5), and not being self-confident (3.49); the curriculum factor of too many subjects being taught in the Lao language (3.67); and the social factors of not learning English as a child (3.67) and of not knowing enough about the background culture (3.63).

Keywords: *English speaking problems, factors affecting English speaking, Lao EFL learners, EFL students majoring in English teaching*

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1. Introduction

English is used as an international language in many countries and is a key to worldwide communication. To teach speaking skills to students successfully, it is essential that teachers understand the problems that students face in speaking English (Alrasheedi, 2020). For example, it has been found that even after students have completed their graduate degree in English, some of them still have trouble speaking even a little English (Chand, 2021). Students have always faced challenges, and thus teaching English to non-English speakers needs

appropriate methods and strategies (Hasanah & Utami, 2019).

Speaking with other people not only improves a learner's grammar, but also vocabulary and writing skills. Students are able to analyze, give a talk, and demonstrate how forms of language should be used differently to transfer their feelings, thoughts, and stories. It is essential for students to speak outside of the classroom, as numerous businesses and organizations tend to hire such language speakers. Furthermore, fluent English can help local and international learners develop more skills and knowledge in real life situations when

travelling or taking part in new learning processes in many different countries (Thi Loan, 2022).

In the past, Laos had poorly-implemented education systems. Even though the education system of Laos has been developed and English is now taught at every level from primary school to university, some university students may still not perform very well in speaking English. Gutiérrez-Colón & Somsivilay (2021) noted that because the higher education system of Laos is still young, many teachers have a lack of experience. Therefore, they suggest that teachers teach students in smaller groups, collaborate on the materials and activity design, and reach agreement as to which methodology should be applied for each level.

At Souphanouvong University, although large numbers of students choose to major in English, this does not mean that their English is competent. In the Faculty of Education, which is separate from the main campus, many students from the northern provinces of Laos choose to attend and major in English teaching. Many of these students do not seem to enjoy performing English speaking activities, as they prefer to talk in their native language or stay quiet during class. Some of them might understand when listening to other people talking but not know how to respond, while some might understand very little.

Although in the past, the faculty has hosted native English-speaking volunteers who could help motivate students to speak English better, they were not available during the Covid pandemic. Although teachers have tried pair work, student presentations and other speaking activities, students are reluctant to participate in these. Therefore, this is a key problem. Research studies from Thailand (Sha'ar & Boonsuk, 2021), Indonesia (Azwar et al., 2021) and Saudi Arabia (Alrasheedi, 2020) have also identified this as a problem.

Due to the difficulties mentioned, it is essential to increase not only students' motivation but also their confidence in speaking English, both informally as well as in public speaking. As a result, it was important to investigate the key factors that affected students'

English speaking in order to improve this situation in Laos.

2. Material and Methods

2.1 The population

The population of this study was 53 students, including 29 females, at university in years 2 to 4, as summarized in Table 1. All were studying at the Department of Language Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University, during the academic year 2021-22. From this group, 49 usable questionnaires were obtained.

2.2 Research instrument (tool)

This was a quantitative research study, and the instrument employed was a questionnaire that investigated the factors affecting students' English speaking. Firstly, information related to these factors was identified from a number of international journals. The questionnaire consisted of 40 items in total, many of which were adapted from Alrasheedi (2020), Azwar et al. (2021) and Sha'ar & Boonsuk (2021). The questionnaire was further adapted, with 12 new questions based on the actual situation of the participants in Laos. Four of these related to the curriculum and three to the school environment. The questionnaire was written in English, and then assessed by the researchers from a student perspective. It was also reviewed by an Australian volunteer who was a research advisor to the faculty, and a Thai student who had been studying English.

It was then translated into Lao, as it was essential to make the questions clear for the participants. Although the researchers had planned to pilot the Lao version of the questionnaire with other students studying English on the main campus of the university, there was insufficient time before the end of term.

The questionnaire focused on five main types of factors affecting students' English speaking, as indicated in Table 2. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the degree to which each factor affected students' English speaking: (1) Strongly disagree (SD), (2) Disagree (D), (3) Neutral, (4) Agree (A), and (5) Strongly agree (SA).

2.3 Data collection

The researchers were permitted by the Dean of the Faculty of Education to distribute the questionnaires to the students. After receiving permission, the questionnaires were copied, checked and distributed to the participants. The questionnaires were anonymous, to encourage students to be honest in their responses. Students at each year level were given the questionnaires by the three research team members at different times in February, 2022. The survey took about 20 minutes for the students to complete. Finally, the questionnaires were collected, and the data was analyzed and interpreted.

2.4 Data analysis

The program SPSS (17.00) was used to analyze the data. Calculations were made of the mean, median, mode and standard deviation, along with frequency, percentage and cumulative percentage for the total group, as well as for years 2, 3 and 4 separately.

3. Results

Table 3 indicates the factors affecting students' speaking for all year level students majoring in English at the Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University. Overall, the results indicated that the classroom environment affected students' speaking the most. The very high classroom temperature and noise outside the classroom made it difficult for students to concentrate.

The highest student factors were not knowing the right vocabulary words, not knowing what to say although students could understand what people were talking about, and not being self-confident, while the most important social factors were not learning English as a young child and not having enough background about the culture of native English speakers. Finally, it was revealed as a curriculum factor that too many subjects were taught in the Lao language, and this meant students lacked opportunity to talk in English in many of their subjects.

To conclude, the classroom environment, as well as student, social and curriculum factors, caused problems in speaking English for the bulk of the students. However, teacher factors did not seem to be of great importance to them.

The differences among Year 2, Year 3 and Year 4 students for those factors with a mean of 3.50 or higher.

The most important factors for second-year students were the student factors, with the highest being not knowing the right vocabulary words, having difficulty forming sentences, not knowing what to say in speaking activities, and being afraid of making mistakes. The only other factor which ranked quite highly was not having enough background about the culture of native English speaker, which was a social factor.

However, for third-year students, the highest student factor was that most preferred to speak English to native speakers, given that a few native speakers had recently taught them as volunteer teachers. Other student factors were not knowing what to say, not knowing the right vocabulary, being afraid of making mistakes and not being able to form sentences. Additional key factors affecting their speaking were the high classroom temperatures and not speaking English as a young child.

Finally, the fourth-year students found that the school environment factors of too much noise and high temperatures were the main problems preventing them from concentrating on speaking. They also thought that too many subjects were taught in the Lao language and that there were not enough hours in class to practice speaking, both curriculum factors, and that they lacked background about Western culture, a social factor. Student factors were not as important for these students, with the highest as not being self-confident to speak.

In summary, the vital factor affecting the second-year students' speaking was that they did not know the right vocabulary words, while the third-year students had a preference for speaking to native speakers and the fourth-year students lost their concentration when there was noise near their classroom.

4. Discussion

The results of the present research showed that the main problems for year-two students was that they did not have the right vocabulary words and were not able to put words into sentences. Some possible speaking strategies might be to practice specific patterns but substituting

different words, to read magazines or online articles aloud several times for new words, and to practice saying new words in short sentences. In addition, if students cannot think of any ideas, teachers might provide, for example, some free-choice topics or ones about daily routines, computers, or holidays for students to prepare to talk for two minutes.

The main problem for most of the year-three students, however, was that they wanted to speak to native speakers. Since few English-speaking volunteers were currently available due to Covid, teachers could suggest that students talk to native speakers at places such as @ My Library or the public library, or at the night market. Some students might also try to get more practice by applying for jobs in hospitality venues, or by teaching young children at primary school level.

Finally, the main problem for students in year four was that the classroom was too noisy. Unfortunately, although it is impossible to stop the noise, teachers might develop some alternative activities that require less concentration, perhaps using English for singing, playing games, or using more body language.

Overall, in the current study, many of the problems that students faced in speaking English were factors outside the teacher's control, such as classrooms that were too hot or located near noisy locations. However, the top student factor was students not knowing the right vocabulary words, and it is important that teachers provide some incentives to increase students' motivation to talk in English. For example, teachers could try to help students learn and speak better by assigning vocabulary tasks as homework. Some appropriate speaking activities might include having free talks, creating an activity to get students to explain the meanings of words that other students might guess, listing words that all students need to know, providing frequent free conversation so that students would be brave enough to talk with their classmates as much as possible, using flash cards and describing words to get their meanings, and bringing in real objects, passing them around, and encouraging students to use those objects in their own sentences.

In a tangentially related study, Kittikhoun et al., (2015) investigated factors affecting the use of the library by lecturers at the Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University. They found that high temperature was the main factor that affected lecturers' using the library, which was similar to the present study that found classroom environment was the significant factor affecting students' speaking English.

Alrasheedi (2020), as in the present study, used a 5-point Likert questionnaire to determine the factors influencing the speaking performance of students studying English. His sample included 200 female and male EFL learners majoring in various fields at Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia. With respect to student factors included in Alrasheedi as well as the present study, Alrasheedi found students feared making mistakes, were worried about speaking, were not able to think of any ideas, cared about improving and were self-confident. This compares to the present study, which also found that students feared making mistakes, were worried, could not think of any ideas, did **not** care about improving and were **not** self-confident. Note that the present study expressed all factors as negatives, whereas Alrasheedi used both positive and negative factors. All of Alrasheedi's means relating to the greatest concerns were higher than in the present study, except for self-confidence. In summary, what Alrasheedi and the present study found were many student factors that were important, in comparison to teacher factors, which were not as important.

Azwar et al. (2021) studied factors influencing Indonesian EFL learners at the University of Bengkulu. A questionnaire using a 4-point Likert scale was distributed to 91 English learners, with the questions expressed positively instead of negatively as in the present study. It was impossible to make direct comparisons to the present study because many of the Likert statements were not the same. However, with respect to similar types of statements, Azwar et al. found that students were willing to speak English in class when they were sure that their answer was correct. This is similar to the present study, showing that students did **not** know the

right vocabulary words to say while speaking English. Azwar et al. also found that they were not only willing to speak English in pairs, but also in small groups, some were willing to present their opinions in English and to volunteer to speak individually. Although the means were not completely the same, it suggests that student factors are very significant.

Sha'ar & Boonsuk (2021) studied factors that affected the development of Thai EFL learners' English-speaking skills at Nakhon si Thammarath Rajabhat University (NSTRU). A quantitative method was applied. A questionnaire using multiple choice and yes/no questions was distributed to 12 business English students. The questions were not exactly comparable; however, of those similar to the present study, some of the results were higher and some lower. Sha'ar & Boonsuk found that less than half of the participants were not confident enough to speak English, the majority of the students were afraid of making mistakes, over half did not know the right vocabulary words, and the bulk really wanted to and were not afraid to speak with foreigners who were not their teachers. This compares to the present study, which found that some of the students were not confident about speaking English, feared making mistakes, did not know the right vocabulary, were brave enough to speak English to native speakers. Sha'ar & Boonsuk also looked at teacher factors, as did the present study. Sha'ar & Boonsuk found that most of the students stated that the teachers used different speaking activities and spoke English during class, while less than half of the students in the current study stated that their teacher applied various speaking activities and they also pointed out that their teacher spoke English during class. It is obvious that the results in Sha'ar & Boonsuk's study were higher.

Al-Hassaani and Al-Saalmi (2022) studied 50 Saudi female second-year English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in the English Department, College of Arts, Bisha University, and applied a quantitative research method (students' questionnaire). From the results, less than half of the learners stated that the class time allotted for practicing English speaking skills

was enough or rather enough, a few were neutral, while more than half said that it was not enough. This indicated that the participants felt that class time was insufficient for practicing English speaking skills. This agreed with the results of the present study, which showed that students did not have enough hours in class to practice speaking.

Bhattachaiyakorn and Phettakua (2023) investigated the anxiety levels affecting the English speaking ability of university students at a public university in the northeast region of Thailand and explored the factors influencing such anxiety levels. A quantitative method was applied with 102 questionnaires distributed to first-year students in the English and Communication major. The results showed the rankings of the factors that affected English-speaking anxiety among the participants, with over half of the students indicating that English grammar was the most important factor affecting their English speaking anxiety, and with about half of the students indicating that vocabulary was another important factor that affected speaking. This agreed with the present study, which found that students did not know the right vocabulary words.

Huang (2021) studied factors affecting the English-speaking ability of EFL learners. She used a qualitative method, interviewing only one Chinese student in depth who had previously studied English extensively in China and who was then studying for a master's degree in Australia. She found that the EFL student's main problems in speaking were similar to the student factors in the present study, including having problems with vocabulary and being afraid of making mistakes.

Kalra and Siribud (2020) investigated public speaking anxiety problems faced by Thai EFL students and applied both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results showed that problems related to self-confidence were caused by anxiety. The majority of participants stated that they never felt sure of themselves while speaking English. The present study also found that students were not confident in speaking English, ranked eighth overall with the neutral mean.

Muhammad Khan (2015) studied the influence of speech anxiety on oral communication skills among ESL/EFL learners. He applied a blend of both quantitative and qualitative methods, interviewing and giving questionnaires to 200 students at HITEC University, Taxila, Pakistan. The study results showed that students were afraid of making mistakes, and this lack of confidence was a serious challenge to English language learners' communicative behavior that led to avoidance behavior. This agreed with the present study, which found that students were not confident to speak English.

Tekir (2021) examined the speaking anxiety of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners from a preparatory program at a state university in central Turkey. He applied a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews. It was found that most of the participants did not have sufficient vocabulary words to express themselves in English. Even though they had enough ideas, they had to look for appropriate lexis. This made the task exceptionally challenging, as remembering vocabulary items while communicating was not easy for them. The current study also found that students did not know the right vocabulary words.

Wahyuningshi and Afandi (2020) investigated some of the English speaking problems faced by students of the English Language Education Department at the State Islamic Institute of Kudus and explored some implications for curriculum development in the department. They used a descriptive qualitative method, and the results of their study showed that a significant problem for speaking English was the difficulties of expressing vocabulary words. Students had less networking outside, and had a lack of confidence and opportunity to share culture with others. This compares with the present study, which found that students did not know the right vocabulary words, and were not confident to speak.

Zainurrahman and Sangaji (2019) studied Indonesian university students' speaking difficulties and applied a qualitative method using a speaking test and interviews. Their

findings reinforced the present study's findings of student factors, stating that they found speaking difficult in knowing what to say but not knowing how to say it or what words to use.

5. Conclusion

This study was aimed at determining the factors affecting students' English speaking and suggesting some strategies that could effectively help to improve students' speaking skills. In summary, students in all year levels found that classroom environment factors were the key factors that affected their speaking skills, which meant students could not concentrate when their classroom was too hot or too noisy. Although they felt that it would have been easier had they learned English as a child, this was tied with the highest student factor of not knowing the right vocabulary words. Consequently, it is suggested that teachers actively promote speaking and consider undertaking some of the activities described in the discussion, which may help to improve and develop students' speaking skills in the future.

6. Conflict of Interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

7. Acknowledgments

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Table 1. Survey population

No	Year level	Male	Female	Total
1	Y2	9	9	18
2	Y3	6	12	18
3	Y4	9	8	17

Total	53
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Table 2. Five main types of factors affecting students' English speaking

No	Types of Factors	Question No	Total Questions
1	Student factors	1-12	12
2	Teacher factors	13-25	13
3	Curriculum factors	26-29	4
4	School environment factors	30-33	4
5	Social factors	34-40	7
Total			40

Top ten of the mean	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Sometimes the temperature in my classroom is too hot to be able to concentrate	3.96	1.079
2	I have problems concentrating when there is noise near my classroom	3.78	1.279
3	I do not know the right vocabulary words 8	3.69	1.122
4	I did not learn English as a young child when it would have been easier	3.69	1.294
5	Too many of my subjects are taught in the Lao language	3.67	1.313
6	I do not have enough background about the culture of native English speakers	3.63	1.055
7	Although I can understand what people are talking about, I do not know what to say	3.57	1.000
8	I am not self-confident	3.49	1.120
9	I am afraid of making mistakes	3.43	1.225
10	We do not have enough hours in class to practice speaking	3.43	1.021
Top ten of the mean	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Sometimes the temperature in my classroom is too hot to be able to concentrate	3.96	1.079
2	I have problems concentrating when there is noise near my classroom	3.78	1.279
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8	I am not self-confident	3.49	1.120
9	I am afraid of making mistakes	3.43	1.225
10	We do not have enough hours in class to practice speaking	3.43	1.021

Table 3: Top 10 factors affecting students' speaking ability for combined Year 2, 3 and 4 students majoring in English at the Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University

Table 4: Most important factors (mean 3.50 or greater) affecting students' English-speaking ability for each year at the Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University

Items	Year 2		Year 3		Year 4	
	No	Mean	No	Mean	No	Mean
Sometimes the temperature in my classroom is too hot to be able to concentrate	7*	3.53	2*	3.81	3	4.35
I have problems concentrating when there is noise near my classroom	7*	3.53		3.25	1	4.53
I do not know the right vocabulary words	1	4.00	5*	3.50	7*	3.53
I did not learn English as a young child when it would have been easier		3.00	2*	3.81		3.47
Too many of my subjects are taught in the Lao language		3.24		3.44	2	4.41
I do not have enough background about the culture of native English speakers	3	3.71		3.25	4	4.00
Although I can understand what people are talking about, I do not know what to say	5*	3.59	4	3.63	7*	3.53
I am not self-confident		3.35		3.38	6	3.71
I am afraid of making mistakes	5*	3.59	5*	3.50		3.18
We do not have enough hours in class to practice speaking	7*	3.53		2.81	5	3.94
I prefer to speak to native speakers		2.82	1	3.94		3.35
I cannot put words in a sentence	2	3.76	5*	3.50		2.82
When there is a speaking activity, I can't think of what to say.	4	3.65		3.25		2.94

* Tied for place